

**“It's Been Devastating”: An Interpretative Phenomenological
Analysis of the Experience of being Cyberstalked**

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ABSTRACT

Internet usage across the globe has grown exponentially over the past sixteen years from 361 million users in 2000 to 3.68 billion users in 2016, constituting an increase of over 918% (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2016a). The increase in utilization and advancement of communication technologies has led to an increase in the prevalence of cyberstalking (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009). Consequently, cyberstalking has become a global epidemic (Maple, Short & Brown, 2011). However, in contrast to the ubiquitous nature of cyberstalking, there is relatively little research examining the impact of cyberstalking on victims (Dressing, Bailer, Anders, Wagner & Gallas, 2014; Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009).

The current study aimed to address this paucity in research and explore and understand more about the lived experience of being cyberstalked. Interviews were carried out with five people who had been cyberstalked and transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Three superordinate themes emerged including 'feeling powerless', 'loss' and 'trying to make sense of the perpetrator'.

The findings illuminate the devastating impact of cyberstalking upon victim's wellbeing with many experiencing suicide ideation to end the torment. Organisations such as advocacy services, anti-stalking organisations, the police force and employers were found to provide inadequate support and exacerbate feelings of powerlessness. In coping, participants employed various strategies, but far from alleviating their suffering, such strategies appeared to compound their distress. The findings highlight the role for Counselling Psychology in providing support to those who have been targeted by a phenomenon that is likely to become more prolific (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009).

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ABBREVIATIONS

GAD	Generalized Anxiety Disorder
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
UEL	University of East London

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

In 2016 the internet was used daily or almost daily by 82% of adults (41.8 million) in Great Britain and the most popular online activity was communicating with others (ONS, 2017). Social network sites, email, instant messaging, blogging and chat rooms and are just some of the means by which people in today's society can interact with one another. Such web-based technologies facilitate fast-paced, asynchronous, low cost methods of communication (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson & Smallwood, 2006). The rise in popularity of online communication is reflected in the vast number of subscriptions to Facebook, which currently stands at 1.68billion subscribers (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2016b), constituting 22.9% of the world's population. Increased ownership and usage of smart phones and mobile devices has facilitated the growth in online communication (Statista, 2017) and social media has become a part of everyday life and a cultural norm (Smith, Smith & Blazka, 2017).

When used appropriately, online communication can decrease loneliness and depression (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002), provide a valuable source of support for vulnerable individuals (Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010) and expand one's social network (Chaulk & Jones, 2011; McKenna et al., 2002). However, there is mounting evidence of online communication being used malevolently to monitor, pursue or harass others (Dressing et al., 2014). The growing use of electronic media mean that victims can be targeted through multiple channels (Maple et al., 2011) and reports indicate that cyberstalking is expanding at a rapid pace (Alexy, Burgess, Baker & Smoyak 2005).

In comparison to offline stalking, cyberstalking has received considerably little attention (Reyns, Henson & Fisher, 2012) and further research into this phenomenon is essential (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009). Much of the research into cyberstalking that has been undertaken, has gathered statistical data related to the prevalence of cyberstalking (e.g. Dressing et al., 2014; Reyns et al., 2012) and characteristics of cyberstalking behaviour (e.g. Dressing et al., 2014; Alexy et al., 2005; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Of the few studies that have focused on the impact of cyberstalking, quantitative methods have commonly been employed (e.g. Dressing et al., 2014; Maple et al., 2011; Chaulk & Jones, 2011). It is anticipated that the use of exploratory qualitative methods in the current study will facilitate a detailed and rich understanding of the experience of being cyberstalked.

1.2 Relevance to Counselling Psychology

Cyberstalking may suffer from being dismissed as less real and detrimental than offline stalking (Maple et al., 2011) and terms such as 'Facebook stalking' trivialize the seriousness of cyberstalking (Dressing et al., 2014). However, the consequences of being cyberstalked are multifaceted and affect the psychological, social and economic aspects of the victim's life (Maple et al., 2011) with cyberstalking victims reporting depression, suicide ideation, PTSD symptomology, fearfulness and anger (Short, Linford, Wheatcroft & Maple, 2014). The profession of Counselling Psychology strives to enhance and build upon an individual's wellbeing and empower clients and research participants (Cooper, 2009). In line with the values of Counselling Psychology, this research project strives to explore the experience of being cyberstalked by giving a voice to the

victims of cyberstalking to learn more about the experience and psychological impact of this form of harassment. Support for victims of cyberstalking is vital (Short et al., 2014) and it is anticipated that the current research project will illuminate the role of Counselling Psychology in providing support to those affected.

1.3 Reflexive Note

Prior to the commencement of this research project, I had made a conscious decision not to join any of the popular social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. The possibility of online communication being used malevolently to harm me left me feeling anxious and fearful. Despite my friends, family and work colleagues encouraging me to join such social networking forums, I firmly opted out. However, when an increasing number of reports started to appear in the media in 2012 of people being cyberstalked, trolled and cyberbullied, I felt concerned for those targeted and my interest in malevolent online communication and the mental health distress that it created grew. The government seemed unable to stop perpetrators and there appeared to be little sympathy from the public towards those targeted, despite the apparent distress inflicted. I decided that instead of circumventing social media, I wanted to begin engaging with it to learn more about the lived experience of people who were being cyberstalked.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by defining cyberstalking before presenting research locating cyberstalking to commonly exist in parallel with offline stalking. The historical context and social construction of stalking is discussed followed by a brief overview of the key characteristics of offline and online stalking. Research and theory examining the experience of being cyberstalked including mental health distress created and coping strategies employed are presented and critiqued. Finally, the chapter concludes with a rationale for this research project and the research questions it aims to answer.

2.2 Defining Cyberstalking

Cyberstalking is defined within the literature in a multiplicity of ways (Sheridan & Grant, 2007) and definitions are likely to continue to evolve as technology progresses (Reyns et al., 2012). Maple et al. (2011) suggest that while definitions vary, they all include the common theme of a repetition of harassing behaviour leading to fear in the victim. The Protection from Harassment Act (1997) states that 'an offence of stalking can only be established where an offence of harassment has taken place which involves 'causing the person (victim) distress or alarm' on at least two occasions (Home Office, 2012). Therefore, the victim's perception of the perpetrator's actions is pivotal in deciphering if the behaviour constitutes online stalking. The National Centre for Cyberstalking Research (2012a) defines cyberstalking as 'a course of action that involves more than one incident perpetrated through or utilising electronic means, that causes distress, fear or alarm' (p. 4). This definition chimes with the Protection of Harassment Act

while also not specifying a definitive list of online behaviours that may soon become out of date. It is the definition proposed by the National Centre for Cyberstalking Research that will be employed for the current research project when referring to 'cyberstalking' and 'online stalking'.

Examples of online stalking behaviour include repeated unwanted emails or instant messages, posting false or hostile details about the victim online, hacking into personal accounts, subscribing to products or services in the victim's name and recruiting others to harass the victim (Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Cyberstalking shares similarities with other forms of online malevolent behaviour such as cyber harassment, cyberbullying and trolling (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014). The period of time over which the behaviour occurs differentiates cyberstalking from cyber harassment with cyberstalking taking place over a protracted period of time (Ogilvie, 2000). Beran and Li (2005) suggest that cyberbullying is the equivalent of cyber harassment but that the former is associated with children while the latter is relevant to adults. Trolling is characterised by the intentional provocation of an emotional response through online comments or posts (Hardaker, 2010). Cyberstalking differs from trolling in that the former is targeted towards a specific person whereas the latter is undertaken indiscriminately (Hardaker, 2010).

Contradictory prevalence rates of cyberstalking studies abound owing to variations in samples drawn on, methods employed and how the term 'cyberstalking' is operationalised (Sheridan & Grant, 2007; Cavezza & McEwan, 2014). A study by Dressing et al. (2014) found prevalence rates varying from 43.4% to 6.3% depending on the definition employed, particularly if a duration or particular quality of the unwanted contacts is specified within the definition. Moreover, cyberstalking is rarely reported (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009),

and this further compounds the difficulty of establishing prevalence rates. An Accurate estimate of the prevalence of cyberstalking is therefore unknown (Short et al., 2014).

2.2.1 Cyberstalking and Offline Stalking

Reyns, et al. (2012) suggest that the matter of whether cyberstalking is a variant of stalking rather than distinct from stalking is open to debate. However, Sheridan and Grant (2007) propose that cyberstalking exists in parallel with offline stalking and occurs in varying degrees rather than as a separate form of stalking in isolation. They propose that electronic methods such as emails or blogging websites offer alternative weapons in a stalker's arsenal. Similarly, Maple et al. (2011) suggest that stalkers have *become* cyberstalkers and utilise new and evolving electronic resources at their disposal to target victims. In their study they found that 76% of participants were stalked offline and this progressed to include online stalking, 4% were stalked online and this progressed to include offline stalking and 20% of participants were stalked purely online. A strikingly similar proportion of participants (74.2%) in a study by Dressing et al. (2014) reported that they had been subjected to both online and offline stalking. In their study, they recruited 6379 participants from a social networking site. Their study revealed that 42% of participants experienced simultaneous onset of cyberstalking and offline stalking, 16.5% reported that cyberstalking preceded offline stalking and in 15.8% of cases, offline stalking preceded cyberstalking. The authors propose that cyberstalking should be considered as an adjunct or a variant of offline stalking. Other studies have yielded similar results, primarily finding that the majority of victims of cyberstalking have also been stalked offline

by their perpetrators (e.g. Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; Short et al., 2014; Alexy et al., 2005).

Cumulatively these findings suggest that cyberstalking often occurs in conjunction with offline stalking. While the focus of this piece of research remains centred on the experience of cyberstalking, it is essential to consider it within the broader context of offline stalking in order to locate and examine the experience of cyberstalking within this. The following sections will consider the historical context of stalking and parties contributing to its construction.

2.2.2 Historical Context of Stalking

Stalking behaviour is millennia old despite the crime being of relatively contemporary construction and was captured in Shakespeare's *Othello* (Meloy, 1998) and Louise May Alcott's novel 'A Long Fatal Love Chase' written in 1866 (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). Stalking was one of the last interpersonal crimes to be criminalised (Miller, 2012) and as of 1989 stalking was not legally prohibited in any country. However, after Robert Bardo murdered actress Rebecca Schaeffer in 1989 and following a succession of murders in California by persons under restraining orders, the first anti-stalking law was passed in 1990 in California (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). By 1999 every other US state and numerous other countries around the world had passed similar legislation (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). In the UK, The Protection from Harassment Act came into effect on 16th June 1997 (Home Office, 2012). National Stalking Awareness Day was introduced in 2011 and falls on 18th April (Ministry of Justice, 2012). The aim of the day is to encourage more victims to report the crime, seek help early and inform people of what can be done to assist them.

2.2.3 Social Construction of Stalking

Stalking was not discovered but constructed as a way to conceptualise a particular type of relational behaviour (Mullen, Pathe & Purcell, 2001). Crimes such as stalking are social constructions brought to the public's attention through claims making by activists, officials or the press (Holstein & Miller, 2003). The introduction of this legislation was prompted by the media who labelled the term 'stalking' (Keenahan & Barlow, 1997). The media plays a pivotal role in the construction of social problems and following the sensationalised media coverage of the murder of Rebecca Schaefer, stalking was understood as an irrational, random and violent crime committed by a mentally unstable fan and was initially dubbed 'star-stalking' (Lowney & Best, 1995). News coverage is often socially distorted, rooted in assumptions, myths and stereotypes and presented in accordance with the ideology of the media distributor (Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002). Claims about a new crime usually typify the offender, the victim and the crime (Lowney & Best, 1995) and men unknown to women are commonly depicted in the media as potential psychopaths (Brockway & Heath, 1998). The media constructed stalking to be a violent, gendered crime carried out by a psychopathic stranger usually a male to a helpless victim, typically a woman. This construction invoked entrenched societal stereotypes of women being victimised by men and resonated with cultural narratives (Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002).

Lowney and Best (1995) suggest that stalking wasn't constructed as a social problem until the murder of Rebecca Schaefer as it wasn't presented in a way that conformed to cultural myths. They argue that Rebecca Schaeffer was not the first celebrity to be stalked, John Hinckley stalked actress Jodie Foster before attempting to assassinate president Reagan in 1982. They propose that stalking

therefore, did not simply emerge following a well-publicised crime against a celebrity but rather Schaeffer's murder became the typifying example of stalking.

The media's coverage of celebrities being 'star-stalked', initiated a focus on instances of non-celebrities being stalked and illuminated plentiful examples of women being targeted. News stories emerged about women being targeted by a former spouse or partner and stalking was understood to be a precursor to serious violence. Social movements such as the battered women's movement and the victim's rights movement supported the new legislation and star stalking was reconstructed as a violent crime by current or former husbands or partners against women and renamed 'stalking'. However, it continued to be perceived to be perpetrated by a person with a mental health disorder. (Lowney & Best, 1995).

Spitzberg and Cupach (2003) propose that tensions exist within the field regarding the conceptualisation and theoretical underpinnings of stalking owing to the conflicting agendas of contributing parties. They propose that legal domains conceptualise stalking as a pure crime whereas feminists and victim's groups conceptualise stalking as an issue of power, protection and patriarchy. Furthermore, clinical groups view stalking as a product of individual pathology while social scientists position stalking as existing within the realms of interpersonal relationship theory. Spitzberg and Cupach (2003) suggest that the reconceptualising of stalking as relational as opposed to the prototypical actions of a crazed individual in pursuit of a high-status celebrity represents a sea change in the paradigmatic underpinnings of stalking research.

2.3 Characteristics of Stalking

Stalking is a relational behaviour (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002) and the victim's experience of being stalked is shaped by the complex interplay of dynamics between the perpetrator and themselves. Therefore, characteristics of the co-created cyberstalker-victim relationship will be considered in order to contextualise the victim's experience. As cyberstalking often occurs in parallel with offline stalking, it is essential to briefly draw on the extensive literature on offline stalking before considering the available literature on cyberstalking.

2.3.1 Gender of Victim and Perpetrator

Research into the characteristics of offline stalking has revealed that it is most commonly perpetrated by male perpetrators against female victims (Meloy & Felthous, 2011; Miller, 2012; Blaauw, Winkel, Arensman, Sheridan & Freeve, 2002; Meloy, 1998). Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 175 studies of offline stalking representing over 122,00 individuals and found that between 60 and 80% of victims were female. While this suggests that the media's construction of stalking as a gendered crime rings true, this leaves between 20 and 40 % of victims within Spitzberg and Cupach's (2007) analysis who were male and whose experience of stalking is therefore juxtaposed to societal assumptions of stalking. Spitzberg and Cadiz (2002) argue that such stereotypes may emasculate men who have been stalked by women and lead to a reluctance in them reporting the crime, suggesting that the actual figure of male victims could be considerably higher.

In line with Spitzberg and Cupach's (2007) analysis, Dressing et al. (2014) found that perpetrators of cyberstalking were predominantly male (69%), and victims

were female (80.5%). However, they found that comparatively, the proportion of female perpetrators of cyberstalking in their study (28%) was significantly higher than the proportion of female perpetrators reported in studies examining offline stalking. They suggest that cyberstalking is comprised of indirect aggression and that this form of aggression may be more appealing to women than direct forms of aggression such as confrontation, inherent in offline stalking. Similarly, Maple et al. (2011) suggest that a higher proportion of men are stalked online compared to offline because physical stature and strength is irrelevant in the digital environment. Further evidence that a higher percentage of men are being stalked online compared to offline is apparent in a study by Alexy et al. (2005). They found that men were significantly *more likely* than women to have been cyberstalked.

Together, these findings suggest that the binary assumption of stalking as a crime perpetrated by men against women may not be the case for cyberstalking. Therefore, referring to cyberstalking as a 'gendered crime' fails to take into account the nuances and complexities that exist within this form of behaviour and promotes a unidimensional discourse on the topic that adheres to the stereotypical instances of men victimising women. Furthermore, it fails to recognise, validate and explore scenarios beyond the confines of this stereotype.

2.3.2 Victim and Perpetrator Relationship

Negotiating the quagmire of relational distance within relationships can be problematic, particularly at the beginning of romantic relationships. The stereotype of the persistent pursuer eventually winning over the object of their desire is portrayed in TV shows, films, song lyrics and popular culture where the

persistent romantic is applauded (Miller, 2012). The heroic pursuit of the pursuer to get the object of their desire and the threatening behaviour understood to be a part of stalking behaviour creates a tension within society leading to ambivalence as to the acts that constitute romantic persistence and those that comprise stalking behaviour (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). Behaviours such as sending a gift, showing up unexpectedly or calling victims at night may appear romantic, benign or harmless to others but in the context of previous behaviours and taken holistically can induce fear and distress in victims (Johansen & Thomsen, 2016).

Offline stalking develops most commonly from ex-intimate relationships (Mullen et al., 2001; Miller, 2012; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; Blaauw et al., 2002; Meloy, 1998), followed by work, friendship or non-romantic relationships with stalkers being unknown to their victims being the least common relational dyad (Miller, 2012). Spitzberg and Cupach's (2007) meta-analysis of 175 studies revealed that 79% of victims were acquainted with the perpetrator and almost half (49%) of all stalking emerged specifically from a romantic relationship. Other relational contexts in which stalking occurred included 'service related' (e.g. teacher, counsellor etc.) (29%), 'acquaintance' (23%) and 'intimate non-romantic' (e.g. friend, family member) (15%).

Studies exploring the relationship between perpetrators and victims of cyberstalking have yielded mixed results. Research by Cavezza and McEwan (2014) and Dressing et al. (2014) found that cyberstalkers were more likely to be ex-intimate partners than any other form of relationship category. However, a study by Short et al. (2014) found 'acquaintance' was the most common relationship type with similar proportions of 'current' or 'ex-partners', and 'strangers'. Short et al. (2014) suggest that perpetrators may find cyberstalking appealing due to its anonymity, ease of use, low cost, speed and perhaps a lack

of law enforcement. Similarly, Maple et al. (2011) found little difference in the proportions of 'acquaintance' (20.4%), 'stranger' (21.7%), 'someone I dated casually for a while' (18.2%) and 'unknown' (16.4%). Interestingly, in their study there was no tick box for ex-partners, unless they were married to them, lived with them or had children with them and this accounted for 9.7%. This could account for the high percentage (16.4%) of participants selecting the 'unknown' relationship category.

2.3.3 Stalking Motives

An awareness of the motives of perpetrators and what they bring to the relationship can facilitate an insight into the complex dynamic between the perpetrator and victim and the victim's subsequent experience of cyberstalking. A study by Meloy (2007) found that stalking perpetrators felt shunned or rejected and pursued their victims following the end of a romantic relationship in order to rekindle the romance or exact revenge on them. Miller (2012) reviewed the literature on typologies of stalkers and found that stalkers fell into one of three principal categories. In line with Meloy (2007), the first consisted of intimacy seeking and the second involved intimidating or punishing the victim following rejection from a relationship. A third category proposes the sadistic or predatory stalker motivated by power and control. Miller (2012) suggests a fourth category consisting of those with a psychotic overidentification with the stalker who possesses a desire to replace him or her by essentially aiming to become them. However, the findings from Spitzberg and Cupach's (2007) meta-analysis of 175 studies suggest that the issue of stalking perpetration is more complex than a single motive. They classified motives into 16 categories which they attributed to

one of four overarching types of motive; intimacy based, aggression based, disability based and task conflict or issues. Intimacy related motives included abandonment, dependency, infatuation, jealousy/envy, love, obsession, reconciliation, relationship development and sexual. Aggression based motives consisted of anger/revenge, attack, control/possession and intimidation. Disability based motives included drugs and mental illness while task conflict consisted of scenarios such as neighbourhood disputes or conflict over money. Their analysis suggests that the 'typical' stalking case is fuelled by multiple motives from different categories which appear to be contradictory and juxtaposed.

In terms of cyberstalking, much less research has been carried out to establish the motivation as perceived by the victim or identified by the perpetrator. However, in line with the findings of Meloy (2007), a study by Parsons-Pollard and Moriarty (2009) found that perpetrators cyberstalked their victims to pursue a relationship with them or to seek revenge following rejection.

2.4 Mental Health Distress

Research into the psychological impact of offline stalking has found increased rates of depression, suicide ideation, anxiety and PTSD symptomology among community based samples (e.g. Purcell, Pathe & Mullen, 2005) and clinical based samples (e.g. Pathe & Mullen, 1997). Kuehner, Gass and Dressing (2007) conducted a community-based study investigating the association between stalking victimisation and specific DSM-IV mental disorders and recruited 675 participants. Psychiatric morbidity was assessed using the PRIME-MD Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ). The results revealed that victims of offline stalking

had a significantly higher incidence of major depression and panic disorder and suffered from co-morbid disorders compared to those who hadn't been targeted. There has been very little research to date focussing on cyberstalking and much less on the psychological distress of cyberstalking. The following section will address studies that have explored the psychological impact and critically evaluate them, beginning with quantitative studies before addressing qualitative research.

2.5 Quantitative Research Design Assessing Mental Health Distress

Dressing et al. (2014) explored the prevalence, characteristics and impact of cyberstalking on victims' well-being and mental health and recruited 6379 participants from StudiVZ, a social network site in Germany. The WHO-5 was administered and participants were provided with a list of 16 psychological, psychosomatic and social consequences and asked if they had suffered from any of them as a result of being cyberstalked. The results revealed that victims of cyberstalking experienced significantly poorer mental wellbeing than non-victims and there was no significant difference between those who were purely cyberstalked and those who were also stalked offline. Furthermore, 68.2% reported feeling mistrustful towards others, 55.4% reported feelings of helplessness, 54.9% reported feelings of anger/aggression, 49.6% reported reticence towards unknown people, 34.6% reported feeling depressed, 34.6% experienced a loss of control, 34.6% reported social withdrawal and 23.1% reported experiencing panic attacks.

This study was conducted from a positivist stance using standardised measures to assess wellbeing and provides a broad and useful overview of the impact of

cyberstalking. However, the WHO-5 questionnaire consists of only five questions and as such its scope in establishing a participant's 'wellbeing' is somewhat limited. Furthermore, the design of the study prevents us from ascertaining in what way the psychological, psychosomatic and social consequences (e.g. helplessness, anger, depression) were experienced and the factors that contributed to such feelings. The complex and nuanced impact of cyberstalking beyond the parameters of these specified 16 consequences and five WHO questions remains unexplored. It is also important to bear in mind that the mean age of participants was 24.4 years old and as such the results indicate the impact of cyberstalking on young adults.

The Network for Surviving Stalking (NSS) commissioned a team of researchers at the National Centre for Cyberstalking Research to explore the prevalence, motivation, nature and impact of cyberstalking. A questionnaire was devised and hosted on the NSS website and 324 self-selected participants took part. Maple et al. (2011), affiliates of the National Centre for Cyberstalking Research, conducted an analysis of the findings. Anxiety and PTSD was measured using the GAD-7 and PTSD Checklist, Civilian version (PCL-C), respectively. The Post-Traumatic Cognitions Inventory (PTCI) was also employed to measure trauma-related thoughts and beliefs, believed to underlie post-traumatic psychopathology. This measure consists of 36 items and three dimensions: negative cognitions about the world, negative cognitions about the self and self-blame.

The results revealed that 34.9% of participants experienced all clusters of PTSD symptoms, with 68.5% experiencing cluster B symptoms (re-experiencing of event), 51.9% experiencing cluster C symptoms (avoidance and numbing) and 45.7 % experiencing cluster D symptoms (hyper-arousal). Furthermore, those who experienced PTSD symptoms also exhibited more negative cognitions about

themselves and the world and were likely to blame themselves for negative experiences or the trauma. Their study revealed that those categorised as being PTSD symptomatic reported on average a higher number of methods through which they had been stalked. Maple et al. (2011) suggest that this indicates a link between the extent of harassment and level of psychological harm inflicted.

In terms of anxiety, the results revealed that 36.4% of participants experienced severe anxiety, 17.0% reported moderate anxiety, 17.9% reported mild anxiety and 12.7% reported no anxiety. Their study revealed that there were no significant differences in the scores (GAD-7, PTSD, PTCI), between those who experienced face to face harassment and those who only feared it. The authors propose that this indicates that the threat or fear of physical confrontation from a perpetrator can have a similar psychological impact as actual confrontation.

As regards fear, 80.9% of participants reported feeling fearful and 94.1% felt distressed and respondents were asked to indicate what their primary fear was from a list of 6 'main fears'. These included 'physical injury to self', 'injury to feelings', 'damage to reputation', 'financial loss', 'physical injury to significant others' and 'other'. The results revealed that participants were most fearful of damage to their reputation (34.3%) followed by fearfulness of physical injury to themselves (23.8%). Participants were also asked to identify from a list of 13 behaviours common to cyberstalking, which types of harassment had caused them fear. Examples of such behaviours included receiving 'repeated unsolicited emailing' and 'hostile material, misinformation and false messages' about them. The results showed that all 13 behaviours created fear and that the behaviour reported by most (79.6%) was the perpetrator 'seeking and compiling information' about them and using it to 'harass, threaten and intimidate' them.

The study has provided a broad overview of cyberstalking, some useful statistics and illuminated that cyberstalking creates fear, anxiety and PTSD symptomology in its victims. In terms of research design, the authors state that the survey consisted of free text boxes to provide qualitative information in addition to the questions involving a Likert-type scale. However, they do not provide us with a copy of the qualitative information or provide any insight into the nature of this qualitative information. They also don't indicate how it was interpreted in terms of their data analysis. The absence of any qualitative data and the application of standardised measures such as the GAD-7, PCL-C and PTCI suggests that the authors have adopted a positivist stance. Such measures ascertain if a participant has experienced anxiety or PTSD on a superficial level but don't tell us what aspect brought on the anxiety/PTSD symptomology, how it accumulated over time (or didn't), which parts of their experience were anxiety provoking, how it was manifested, the meaning they attribute to such experiences and how they coped. Similarly, the PTCI ascertained the existence of self-blame and negative cognitions but didn't elicit any rich detail about the substance of such negative self or world views or self-blame. This study is a good starting point in terms of identifying the relevance of anxiety and PTSD but the binary methods employed have failed to capture and unlock the essence of the participant's experience in terms of anxiety, PTSD symptomology and self and world views.

The design of the study has ascertained that the majority of victims feel fearful and that a variety of behaviours induce fear. However, as participants were asked to indicate their primary fear from a pre-populated list, any fears beyond the parameters of the list were not captured in the results. The shortcomings of the list are exemplified in the results with over a fifth of participants (21.3%) selecting 'other', thereby indicating that their primary fear was not included in the survey.

Additionally, the authors don't clarify how they have compiled the list of 13 fear-inducing behaviours and why these are favoured over others. Furthermore, the design of the study has not uncovered in any detail what it is like for participants to experience those fears, why one fear was comparatively more prevalent for them, the meaning they attach their experiences or how they coped with those fears.

Overall, the study provides a useful starting point in recognising the types of distress that victims incur such as fear, anxiety, PTSD symptomology and negative cognitions. However, the absence of the qualitative aspect of their study and the inclusion of pre-populated lists (e.g. fears) means that the results are shaped and limited by the prior assumptions of the researchers. Consequently, the complex and multifaceted experience of being cyberstalked and the meaning of their experiences has not been uncovered. As such, the authors assertion that 'For the first time, we have a picture of what cyberstalking means to victims in the UK' (p.3) is perhaps undermined.

2.6 Qualitative Research Design Assessing Mental Health Distress

A study by Johansen and Thomsen (2016) explored how victims experience the phenomenon of stalking (online and offline), the coping strategies employed and how such coping strategies affect well-being. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 stalking victims in Denmark and interpreted the data using thematic content analysis. Their study revealed that the central component of a victim's experience appeared to be the unpredictability of the stalker's future actions and consequential feelings of powerlessness. They found that this was more troublesome and distressing to participants than coping with the effects of

tangible acts of stalking (however recent), such as receiving unwanted emails or threats of violence. The authors suggest that stalking should be conceptualised as a latent form of violence on the basis of the stalker's unpredictability leading to feelings of powerlessness.

Johansen and Thomsen (2016) draw on Foucault's concept of panopticism and advocate its relevance to stalking in terms of understanding the power relationship between stalker and victim. They suggest that the stalker possesses power over the victim and not because of concrete acts of stalking, but instead due to the feeling of constantly being surveyed and the unpredictability of the nature and timing of future acts of harassment. Johansen and Thomsen (2016) suggest that victims' attempts to take back control of their lives (e.g. by withdrawing from social activities or relocating) paradoxically feeds into the power dynamic between the stalker and the victim, as the manifold and varied ways in which the victim changes their behaviour reinforces the stalker's power.

The authors offer a useful perspective on the concept of powerlessness and how this can be conceptualised as a latent form of violence within stalking. The use of open ended questions and semi-structured interviews elicited rich material and provided a valuable insight into the participants' experience of stalking. This facilitated a key finding; the centrality of not knowing what was coming next or being able to stop the perpetrator and subsequent feelings of powerlessness.

The authors propose that coping strategies lead to participants being socially isolated and briefly refer to literature linking social isolation with low self-worth, inferiority and feelings of condemnation and suggest that 'similar feelings were described by the victims' (p.887) in their study. On this basis, they suggest that victims' coping strategies 'unintentionally contribute to the(ir) mental distress'

(p.887). However, they do not specify what feelings were reported by the participants, how/if such feelings were directly related to them withdrawing from their social network and how/if this impacted on their 'mental distress'. It appears that validity of their study, in terms of transparency and coherence (Yardley, 2000) may have been compromised due to tenuous claims undermining reader resonance. Validity would perhaps have been ameliorated if they had provided extracts from participants explicitly reporting on their feelings, coping strategies and mental health (Shinebourne, 2011). Overall this study offers tremendous value to the field of stalking including cyberstalking as it has provided a useful insight into the complex experience of cyberstalking from the perspective of the victims and highlights the centrality of powerlessness to their experience.

A study by Short et al. (2014) examined the 'diversity of experiences' (p.133) reported by people who have been cyberstalked using thematic analysis. They recruited 100 participants online and asked them to answer six questions in a maximum of 500 words. The questions were as follows: How did it all begin? When did you realize that this was becoming a problem? Provide examples of each of the harassment behaviours experienced. Did any actions improve the situation? Did any actions make the situation worse? Are there any actions that you feel would have protected you better if they had been available to you? What else could have helped improve the situation? The results yielded five key themes including 'control and intimidation', (online and offline), 'the determined offender', 'development of the harassment', 'negative consequences' and 'lack of support'. Negative consequences they classified psychologically and socially with the former including fear, paranoia and anger, flash backs, panic attacks and PTSD. Social effects included damaged reputation, damaged familial relations and loss of work either directly or indirectly as a result of the cyberstalking. In addition to

these five overarching themes, the authors also assert that some participants expressed helplessness and lowered perceptions of control.

This is one of the first qualitative studies exploring the experience of being cyberstalked and is a good starting point in developing our understanding. The aim of Short et al.'s (2014) study was to 'qualitatively expand understanding' (p.134) of cyberstalking and by identifying pertinent themes across the data supported by participant's extracts, they have succeeded in doing this. Many of the six questions asked for details pertaining to the stalking behaviours themselves (e.g. how did it all begin?' 'provide examples of each of the harassment behaviours experienced'). However, introducing a humanistic element relating to how participants felt about the onset of stalking, the emotions that such behaviours created and explicitly what impact they felt the cyberstalking had had on their life may have facilitated a better insight into the 'impact of cyberstalking' and 'the lived experience', as the title of their study promises. Furthermore, limiting interview questions to six and responses to 500 words per question may have prevented some participants from sharing everything that was pertinent to their experience from doing so.

2.7 Coping Strategies

While much of the literature on stalking has focussed on prevalence rates and types of stalking behaviour, far less has centred on coping strategies (Johansen & Thomsen, 2016; Amar & Alexy, 2010). Cupach and Spitzberg (2003) constructed a typology of coping strategies and proposed five types of coping behaviours including 'moving with', moving against', 'moving away', 'moving inward' and 'moving outward'. The first consists of attempts to reason, negotiate

or plead with the stalker (e.g. 'this can't go on', 'let's be friends'), while 'moving against' involves efforts to threaten, or deter the stalker (e.g. 'I'll call the police', 'report you to the boss'). Strategies consisting of creating physical and online distance from the stalker (e.g. changing telephone numbers, changing routes and schedules, blocking email addresses, producing a smaller physical and electronic footprint) are classified as 'moving away' and are intended to make pursuit more time consuming and exhausting. 'Moving inward' tactics involve strategies such as denial, distraction or redefinition of their experience and as such can be conceptualised psychodynamically as defences that are operationalised unconsciously to deal with pain or conflict (Lemma, 2003). Finally, 'moving outward' strategies consist of seeking out and engaging with assistance from third parties. Spitzberg and Cupach (2003) suggest that third parties may include formal parties such as the police or counselling organisations or informal parties such as friends and family.

This study is a useful starting point in gaining a sense of the broad types of coping strategies that victims may employ to deal with stalking behaviour. The authors have drawn on the vast stalking literature and synthesised the multitude of coping strategies to construct five over-arching types of coping behaviours. However, the reductionist nature of the proposed typology has perhaps oversimplified the coping responses of victims and minimised the nuanced, grey areas that exist between the five aforementioned typologies. As individuals, our behaviours do not exist neatly within boxes and generalising coping strategies in such a way is likely to diminish the complex, overlapping and perhaps juxtaposition of coping strategies employed throughout the course of being stalked. Additionally, it seems possible that several strategies could be used simultaneously, at different times throughout the stalking process or in response to/in addition to previous

strategies elucidating (or not elucidating) the desired results. Furthermore, a typology of coping behaviours does not provide rich insight into what it was like for participants to employ such strategies, the thought processes that underpinned them, the factors that they did or didn't take into account when consciously or unconsciously operationalising a coping strategy and how they felt about executing such strategies. While such complexities do not seem to have been accounted for within Cupach and Spitzberg's (2003) classification system, it does offer a useful overview of coping strategies and provides a springboard from which an exploration of engaging in such coping behaviours can be undertaken.

Johansen and Thomsen (2016) found in their study (as discussed in section 2.6) that victims of online and offline stalking employ internal and external coping strategies with the latter consisting of formal and informal categories. Informal external strategies include talking to friends, family or colleagues for support, while formal external strategies consist of obtaining legal advice, approaching the police or obtaining a restraining order. They found that internal coping strategies predominated in their study and propose that such strategies consist of the multiplicity of ways that victims 'regulated their behaviour' (p.886) to cope with the unpredictability of their stalker and re-establish a sense of control. They reported that participants 'self-regulated' by restricting their movement (e.g. withdrawing from or avoiding social activities), relocating, or establishing security routines (e.g. withdrawing from social media, changing passwords, changing routes to work). However, as previously stated, victim's attempts to take back control of their lives paradoxically feeds into the power dynamic between the stalker and the victim, as the changes that the victims introduce through self-regulating behaviours, reinforces the stalker's power. Johansen and Thomsen's

(2016) study offers an interesting perspective on how participants' coping behaviours could be contributing to rather than alleviating their distress and suggests potential for clinical intervention in terms of identifying unhelpful strategies and introducing behaviours that may improve wellbeing.

2.8 Rationale for the Current Research Project and Relevance to Counselling Psychology

While research into offline stalking has progressed significantly over the last two decades, research focussing on cyberstalking is still sparse (Dressing et al., 2014; Reyns et al., 2012; Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; National Centre for Cyberstalking Research, 2012b). Of the studies that have focussed on cyberstalking, the majority have been quantitative in design and aimed to gather statistics on prevalence rates (e.g. Reyns et al., 2012; Dressing et al., 2014), characteristics (e.g. Alexy et al., 2005; Sheridan & Grant, 2007; Dressing et al., 2014) and risk factors for victimisation (e.g. Reyns et al., 2012) and many of these studies have recruited from collegiate populations. Studies that have investigated the psychological impact of cyberstalking have primarily employed quantitative measures (e.g. Dressing et al., 2014; Maple et al., 2011) and such studies provide a useful overview of the experience of being cyberstalked and add value to the field of enquiry. However, quantitative research design is limited in its scope to access the complex and nuanced experience of cyberstalking that exists beyond the constraints of surveys and questionnaires that are often guided by the existing knowledge and assumptions of researchers. It is anticipated that adopting an inductive approach and employing the use of qualitative research methods in the

current research project will facilitate a rich understanding of the multifaceted experience of being cyberstalked and the psychological impact for victims.

Stalking is very relevant to the field of mental health as it produces psychological distress in its victims (McEwan, Mullen & Purcell, 2007) and those working in the field of mental health have a duty to develop their understanding of stalking in order to adequately support this type of victimisation (Miller, 2012; Mullen et al., 2006). Unhelpful terms such as 'Facebook stalking' trivialises the seriousness of cyberstalking (Dressing et al., 2014 p.65) and poor advice instructing victims to turn off their computer (Miller, 2012) invalidates the impact for victims and leaves them bereft of support. The emerging literature on cyberstalking is in its infancy and at too early a stage to provide clinicians with empirically derived evidence upon which to base their clinical practice. The current study aims to address this deficit in knowledge by examining, in depth, the experience of being cyberstalked from the perspective of victims using a qualitative research design. It is hoped that a focus on this impoverished research area will illuminate the consequences for victims and offer insight into how those affected can be best supported by Counselling Psychologists. The dearth of research focussing on cyberstalking raises questions relating to whether this form of stalking yields an entirely new type of distress from that of offline stalking, exacerbates the sort of impact felt by offline stalking or if offline and online stalking interact to create an entirely new and different type of experience. With this in mind, the current research project aims to answer the research questions listed below.

2.9 Research Questions

- How is cyberstalking experienced?
- How do people make sense of their experience of being cyberstalked?
- How do people cope with being cyberstalked?

The next chapter presents a methodology to answer the above research questions.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a discussion of paradigmatic positions, after which my epistemological stance is presented followed by a rationale for my choice of methodology and its philosophical underpinnings. Details pertaining to participant selection and recruitment are provided next along with data collection and analysis methods including how validity was achieved within my research. Ethical considerations and reflexivity conclude the chapter.

3.2 Paradigms

A paradigm is a collection of beliefs that provide the principles for understanding the world and as such represent the basic principles underpinning research (Langdridge, 2007). A multitude of competing research paradigms are acknowledged to exist within social science (Madill & Gough, 2008). The chosen paradigm not only guides the researcher in terms of philosophical assumptions but also in the selection of tools, instruments, participants and methods deployed in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Ponterotto (2005) proposes four principle research paradigms based on Guba and Lincoln's (1994) classification of research frameworks including positivism, post positivism, critical-ideological and constructivism-interpretivism. Each paradigm differs in terms of their ontology, axiology, and epistemology.

Positivists adopt a naïve realist ontology whereby, an objective, external reality is believed to exist that can be identified, apprehended and measured using hypothetico-deductive methods to derive nomothetic knowledge. A dualist

position is assumed whereby the researcher and participant are deemed to be distinct and separate entities. Standardized, rigorous procedures are deployed in order to ensure that the research topic is studied objectively and researcher values are kept separate to the topic being studied.

Post positivists adopt a critical realist ontology whereby it is believed that one true reality exists but that this can only be apprehended and measured imperfectly. A modified dualist position is adopted whereby steps are taken to maintain objectivity and preserve distinct boundaries between the researcher and the participant, but it is acknowledged that researcher values may impact upon the research process.

Critical-ideologists propose that multiple constructed realities exist that are shaped by culture, gender, social and political values. Within this paradigm, a focus is placed on the realities created by a power imbalance with the aim of emancipating oppressed groups and creating a more democratic social order. The enmeshed, collaborative relationship between the researcher and participant is a central component of this paradigm in inciting transformation and empowerment in participants.

Constructivist-interpretivists have a relativist ontology whereby multiple equally valid, subjective, constructed realities exist in parallel in the minds of individuals rather than one true reality. Therefore, truth is not situated in the opposite polarity to falsity, rather truth is intertwined with perception (McConnell-Henry, Chapman & Francis, 2009). This position adopts a hermeneutic approach, which places the dynamic and interaction between the researcher and the participant at the heart of the research in order for the participant's constructed reality to be uncovered and understood by the researcher. Phenomenology is concerned with

understanding every day idiosyncratic, lived experiences by stepping back from a position of unreflective acceptance of a “taken for granted” world towards a reflection and examination of the way in which the world presents itself and how phenomena are experienced (Shinebourne, 2011).

Stalking is a complex phenomenon and central to the issue of stalking is the recipient’s perception of being harassed as stalking is recognized as being experienced by different people in different ways (Mullen, Pathe, Purcell & Stuart, 1999). Therefore, stalking benefits from being researched from a constructivist-interpretivist stance, as multiple realities of the same phenomena are believed to exist in parallel, rather than one true objective reality. Thus, in terms of a paradigmatic position, the current study sits within a constructivist-interpretivist approach, hermeneutics and phenomenology. Approaching the topic of enquiry from this position facilitates an understanding of the idiosyncratic, diverse and complex experience of being cyberstalked

3.3 Rationale for choosing IPA

The choice of methodology is influenced by the paradigm underpinning the research and the choice of paradigm influences the way in which data is collected and analysed (Madill & Gough, 2008). Quantitative research methods such as questionnaires and surveys are underpinned by a positivist paradigm (Madill & Gough, 2008), whereby one external reality is believed to exist. However, stalking is recognised as being a complex phenomenon and experienced by people in a multitude of different ways (Mullen et al., 1999). Quantitative research methods were therefore discounted as a positivist position was deemed to be

juxtaposed to the epistemological position of the current research project whereby multiple equally valid realities of being cyberstalked are posited to exist.

Qualitative research methods strive to explore and unravel the complex experiences of people by obtaining intricate, descriptive data (Howitt, 2010) and various qualitative methodologies were initially considered. Grounded theory aims to generate a theoretical level account of a phenomenon, often requiring a large sample (Smith et al., 2009). Discourse analysis assumes a social constructionist stance, focusing on how people use discourse as a tool to achieve interpersonal and social objectives and on how phenomena are constituted in discourse (Willig, 2013). The focus of the current study is not to generate a theoretical perspective of how cyberstalking is experienced or to examine how online stalking is constituted in discourse. Instead this study aimed to capture the detailed, nuanced accounts of individual experiences of online stalking from the point of view of those targeted and to learn how they make sense of their personal experience. IPA is underpinned by phenomenology and hermeneutics and adopts an ideographic perspective, aiming to explore lived experiences and the meanings people attribute to these experiences (Shinebourne, 2011). IPA's epistemological position is aligned with the research aims and questions of the current project and therefore represents the most appropriate choice of qualitative research method.

Data from semi-structured interviews was analysed using IPA, enabling the rich, multifaceted and personal experience of cyberstalking and the meanings participants attribute to their experiences to be uncovered (Rhodes & Smith, 2010). In order to understand how phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography have contributed to IPA, each philosophical movement will be considered in turn.

3.3.1 Phenomenology

Ultimately all phenomenologists subscribe to a similar goal of exploring the lived experience (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). The core principle of phenomenological enquiry is that experience should be examined in the way that it occurs and in its own terms (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Husserl, a transcendental phenomenological philosopher, focused on exploring a means by which some-one might know their own experience of a phenomenon to such an extent that would enable them to delineate the essential qualities of that experience (Smith et al., 2009). He advocated adopting the “phenomenological attitude” which involves turning one’s gaze towards how the object appears to consciousness, considering it in its own right and separate from other entities (Shinebourne, 2011).

Husserl strived to develop a means for studying human experience objectively and suggested that in order to generate valid data it was essential that the researcher bracket any presuppositions they may have in relation to the research question (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Husserl advocated phenomenological reduction, as it enabled the researcher to access the essence of the object under scrutiny objectively, without it being distorted by the researcher’s agenda (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Free imaginative variation is one such technique and if considering an object such as a house, this technique would involve considering different possible instances of house, one’s past experiences of houses, what makes a house and not a shop, for example, in order to establish the essential features of ‘houseness’ and therefore its essence (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl suggested that an examination and reflection upon every salient aspect of a given phenomenon should be considered in order to access the core essence of the subjective experience of that phenomenon. The focus Husserl

placed upon the process of reflection in accessing the lived experience itself and describing it in terms of its particular features have most influenced phenomenological psychology including IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

While Husserl believed that conscious awareness equated with knowledge, Heidegger, a hermeneutic phenomenologist, focussed on moving from description to interpretation propelled by a desire to uncover and unravel the meaning of being (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). In his major work, *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger postulated that the person is always and inextricably a person in context and that relatedness to the world is a fundamental element of our make-up. (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger disputed the concept of bracketing and suggested that the researcher is as much a part of the research as the participant and that there is no such thing as interpretive research free of judgement or influence of the researcher (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). The key concepts that Heidegger has contributed to IPA are that of being thrown into a world of objects, relationships and language, our being in the world is always perspectival, temporal and in relation to something and finally that the interpretation of meaning making is central to phenomenological enquiry in psychology (Smith et al., 2009).

3.3.2 Hermeneutics

The term hermeneutics derives from the ancient Greek *hermeneuein*, which means “to interpret” or “to understand” and derives from the Greek God Hermes, the messenger of divine truth (Ablett & Dyer, 2009). Its origins lie in the deciphering of ancient biblical texts (Hammersley, 2012). Heidegger believed that interpretation is an inherent part of human experience and that we are continually

seeking to make sense of things (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Schleiermacher, an early 19th century writer of hermeneutics, believed that interpretation consisted of grammatical and psychological interpretation and that interpretation should be undertaken in terms of the context in which it was written (Smith et al., 2009). Psychological interpretation refers to the active effort on the part of the interpreter to recover or make sense of a text and uncover a coherent meaning (Ablett & Dyer, 2009). He argued that interpretation is a craft requiring a range of skills including intuition, rather than a matter of following a set of rigid, pre-defined rules (Smith et al., 2009). He believed that the objective of the process of interpretation was to understand the author as well as the text and that if a holistic, detailed and comprehensive analysis of the text was undertaken, one can achieve “an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself” (Schleiermacher, 1998, p.266).

Heidegger espoused a hermeneutic phenomenology, positing that people are by nature interpreting beings and that phenomenology was an explicitly interpretative activity (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). He argued that fore-conceptions such as prior experiences, assumptions and preconceptions affect the manner in which new stimuli appears to us (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger believed that the only true way for the researcher to conduct a hermeneutic enquiry was to have prior knowledge and fore structure in order to ensure that the questions asked were pertinent (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). In order to protect the process of interpretation he suggested making the subject of enquiry secure by keeping in mind our fore-structures prior to, during and after the process of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009).

Gadamer echoes Heidegger’s view regarding fore-structures, however Gadamer suggests that fore-structures can only be identified when the process of

interpretation is underway and not before (Smith et al., 2009). Gadamer (1990) asserts, “the important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text (or thing being interpreted) can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings” (p.269).

3.3.3 The Hermeneutic Circle

The basic interpretive principle for Schleiermacher was that any particular thing we want to understand “can only be understood from out of the whole” (Schleiermacher, 1998, p.27) of which it forms a part. For example, in order to understand a word, it is looked at in the context of the sentence and in order to understand a sentence, the cumulative meanings of each individual word are examined (Smith et al., 2009). The hermeneutic circle relates to the dynamic, non-linear process of interpretation whereby individual parts are examined to understand the whole and the whole is understood in terms of its individual constituent parts (Smith et al., 2009). The back and forth motion of questioning, examining and re-examining text produces an ever-expanding circle of ideas about the phenomenon under investigation and this constitutes the hermeneutic circle (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009).

Smith et al. (2009) highlight the double hermeneutics inherent in IPA because the participant is trying to make sense of their personal world and the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant making sense of their world. Smith and Osborn (2003) point out that the researcher only has access to the participant’s experience through what they report and also that this information is perceived through the researcher’s lens.

Smith et al. (2009) identify another double hermeneutics involving a 'hermeneutics of empathy' and a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. The former relates to an attempt to adopt an insider's perspective while the latter involves taking a different angle from that of the participant and puzzling over their experience. They propose that successful IPA research takes up a centre ground position, combining both stances. In this sense, the researcher attempts to stand in the participant's shoes in order to understand what the experience is like from their perspective (hermeneutics of empathy) but also stand next to the participant with a sense of curiosity (hermeneutics of suspicion), asking questions about their experience. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that hermeneutics of curiosity involves a shifting of focus from the words of participants towards the interpretative work of the researcher.

3.3.4 Idiography

IPA is idiographic in nature and two-tiered Smith et al. (2009). Firstly, the detail and depth of analysis required must be meticulous and systematic. Secondly IPA seeks to understand how particular instances of lived experiences have been understood from the perspective of particular people in particular contexts. IPA adopts an inductive approach (Smith et al., 2009) whereby themes are specifically linked to the data and in isolation to theories and themes identified in previous research (Patton, 1990). As such, there is no pre-determined research hypothesis being tested. IPA uses individual case analysis or small, carefully selected sample sizes, which should be homogenous so that convergence and divergence can be examined in detail (Smith et al., 2009).

3.4 Participant Selection and Recruitment

The following recruitment criteria was applied:

- Subjection to cyberstalking: A course of action that involves more than one incident perpetrated through or utilising electronic means, that causes distress, fear or alarm (National Centre for Cyberstalking Research, 2012a, p.4).
- Minimum age: 18

I posted my invitation to participate and consent form (appendix A) on Twitter and the National Stalking Helpline website and Action Against Stalking website. I recruited a participant almost immediately on Twitter but it took over a year to attract a second participant through the National Stalking Helpline website. I also joined in excess of twenty Facebook groups relating to cyberstalking and posted details of my research project on group feeds including my invitation to participate and consent form. Some of the Facebook groups that I joined included 'online harassment and cyber stalking', 'cyberbullying & stalking' 'Stop Cyber Harassment and Stalking', 'Victims of Cyber Bullying/Bullying', 'Stop Cyberbullying' and 'Stop Bullying Cyberbullying, and suicide'.

While I anticipated experiencing difficulty recruiting participants due to the sensitive nature of my research topic, I underestimated the amount of time and resource required in attracting participants. For example, some people were sceptical of my authenticity as a researcher and suggested that I was a perpetrator, citing my recent subscriptions to Facebook and Twitter and a corresponding lack of online activity on social media as a cause for concern. Others signalled interest in my research project but required contact with my

research supervisor to validate my authenticity as a researcher. Thankfully, my supervisor kindly obliged and their concerns allayed but making such arrangements required planning, especially with an overseas participant residing in a different time zone.

Furthermore, many people responded to my posts on Facebook but answering their questions proved to be time consuming and while a few initially agreed to take part, they later declined to sign the consent form. This was rather frustrating. Two separate participants based in America did provide their consent and requested to be interviewed over Skype but did not answer my skype calls at the agreed times and both interviews had to be aborted. After tentatively sending a follow up email to both parties asking if they still wished to take part, I did not receive a response and we had no further contact.

I spent many months persevering with recruitment via Facebook but it was essentially rather fruitless and in hindsight I regret having spent so much time exploring this avenue. Only one participant was recruited successfully through Facebook. I decided to re-post my invitation to participate and consent form on the Action Against Stalking website and the National Stalking Helpline website. Almost immediately, I recruited one more participant through each organisation and interviews were carried out swiftly. In total, five participants took part in this study, in line with Smith et al.'s (2009) recommendations for professional doctoral research projects. Two participants were recruited from the National Stalking Helpline website, one from the Action Against Stalking website, one from Facebook and one from Twitter. Participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms and identifying features have been removed from transcripts. The table overleaf introduces the participants. Please see appendix B for full participant details.

Pseudonym	Age Bracket	Ethnicity	Occupation	Prior Relationship with Cyberstalker	Examples of Cyberstalking behaviours
Kirsty	20-29	White British	Finance	Met on a dating website (1 date)	Emails, text messages, phone calls
Steve	60-69	White British	Retired (nurse)	His partner's brother	Impersonating him and his partner on a forum and making offensive comments to others, making false claims on Facebook accusing Steve of paedophilia, inciting others to 'attack' them on social media
Elaine	50-59	White American	Counsellor	Ex-husband	Text messages, emails, phone calls
Rafiq	20-29	Asian British	Teacher	Friend	Text messages, emails, phone calls, hacked into his girlfriend's Facebook account and monitored their interactions and movements offline
Barbara	60-69	White British	Retired (unknown)	Friend	Blogs and email accounts set up in her name and offensive emails sent to others, profiles set up in her name on sexually explicit websites inciting men to make contact with her

Table 1 Participant details

3.5 Data Collection

Three interviews were carried out over Skype as participants were unable to travel to London. One interview was held on campus in a private room at UEL and one was carried out at a conference centre at Kings Cross. All participants

were unaccompanied during the interview, with the exception of Steve, who's partner was with him at home while the interview took place. Steve often stated 'we' throughout the interview to refer to himself and his partner who were both cyberstalked. Semi-structured interviews employ the use of open, non-leading questions and involve maintaining a balance between retaining interviewer control and natural conversation (Madill & Gough, 2008). Schedules that are too long and complex can be constraining (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Therefore, the interview schedule (appendix C) incorporated open, non-leading questions in a deliberately short and simple format. The sequence and form of questions were amended in order to follow up on answers and deviation from the interview schedule was appropriate where the dialogue focused on the participants' experience pertinent to cyberstalking (Kvale, 1996). I tried to keep interviews on track and away from topics superfluous to the current research project (Kvale, 1996). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.6 Data Analysis

The transcripts were analysed following the principles suggested by Smith et al. (2009). I began by listening to a taped recording of Kirsty's transcript and making initial notes. This enabled me to gain a broad overall sense of the data as a whole and to note features beyond those of her words such as the tone, volume and degree of hesitancy in her voice. For example, Kirsty questioned her perpetrator's motive throughout the interview but her tone of voice, the emphasis she placed on 'why' and the questioning way in which she reported aspects of her experience suggested to me that she was asking *me* for answers, perhaps in

the context of a cyberstalking researcher or a psychologist. This important aspect could not have been captured by focussing solely on the transcripts.

Next, I read and re-read Kirsty's transcript and noted my first impressions and observations in a notebook in order to bracket them and remain focussed on the data in hand. I found that bracketing was a useful part of the process that encouraged me to stay true to Kirsty's experience and minimised the influence of my own assumptions on the data. For example, Kirsty met her cyberstalker on a dating website and when I initially read the transcripts, I found myself wondering why she wasn't more assertive in letting him know that she wasn't interested in a relationship with him. However, by recording my thoughts and musings, it enabled me to become more aware of my own processes and to focus my analysis on Kirsty's lifeworld and experience of being cyberstalked and away from my own attitudes and beliefs. This enabled me to fully immerse myself in Kirsty's world and really engage with her experience.

I examined the data, line by line, in terms of its semantic content and language used and produced a comprehensive and detailed set of exploratory comments. I tried to identify what was important to her and the meanings that she attributed to her experiences, staying true to her words. I noted the use of her non-verbal language such as laughter, pauses and hesitancy and made interpretations as to what this may also tell me about her experience. I also tried to keep in mind the context of Kirsty's experience while also identifying abstract concepts from the data.

The next stage involved developing emergent themes. Here I focussed on specific parts of the transcript, whilst also keeping in mind what was learned through the whole process of making my exploratory notes. The process of

breaking up the data and reorganising it and bringing it back together represents one manifestation of the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2009). This part of the analysis was time consuming and I felt as if I was looking at each segment of the transcript in meticulous, microscopic detail before taking a step back to consider it in terms of the rest of the transcript and moving onto the next segment. I converted my exploratory notes into themes by producing concise statements of the main elements contained within the exploratory notes. I found this stage to be particularly challenging as I was fearful of losing the richness and complexities contained within the exploratory notes when reducing them down to themes. However, I found that discussing my ideas with my research supervisor and within my peer research supervision group was useful in helping me come to decisions about the themes and feel more assured in the decisions I was making. See appendix D for an example of exploratory notes and emergent themes.

Following on from this, I searched for connections across my emergent themes, mapping those that seemed to fit together and discarding those that appeared superfluous. I tried to pull together the themes which encapsulated the most interesting and salient aspects of Kirsty's account. It was important to me that I did my participants justice in reporting their experience and I spent considerable time identifying my themes. I found that putting my themes into a diagrammatical representation enabled me to organise them and view them holistically and in relation to one another (appendix E).

After having analysed Kirsty's transcript and in line with IPA's idiographic commitment (Smith et al., 2009), I bracketed my ideas and themes so that they did not influence my analysis of the next transcript. I then moved on to the remaining participants and analysed their transcripts, one by one, using the same process. After I had analysed each transcript I laid out my diagrams and I looked

for patterns across them (appendix F). From this I identified my superordinate themes and the themes that sat within them, identifying idiosyncrasies within and across cases.

3.7 Validity

Yardley (2000) suggests four flexible principles as a guide to achieving validity within qualitative research. These include sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance and are considered in turn below.

3.7.1 Sensitivity to Context

In qualitative research, sensitivity to context is required at all stages of the research process (Shinebourne, 2011). Sensitivity to the context of theory was achieved by immersing myself in the research topic and reviewing the literature, as demonstrated in chapter 2. Yardley (2000) highlights that while theory on the subject can influence interpretation, it is essential that the analysis is sensitive to the data itself and that observations which contradict current theory are actively sought and examined. I was mindful when analysing the data to bracket my foreknowledge and ground my findings in the data.

Yardley (2000) suggests that sensitivity to the context of the relationship between the researcher and the participant is essential, as the researcher is unable to remain neutral. Yardley (2000) advocates the need for a consideration of the specific effects of the researcher's actions and characteristics on the research

process. This was achieved through reflexivity and this is addressed in 3.9 and 5.5.

3.7.2 Commitment and Rigour

Yardley (2000) suggests that commitment and rigour refers to the thoroughness of data collection, analysis and reporting of the data. Smith et al. (2009) advocate a sample size of between four and ten participants when conducting research employing the use of a IPA methodology in order to facilitate a rich level of data. I chose to use a sample size of five as larger samples can undermine IPA's idiographic underpinning and lead to more descriptive data (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). The data was analysed systematically, methodically and meticulously, as set out by Smith et al. (2009) and detailed in section 3.6. Throughout the process I worked collaboratively with the director of studies and shared findings with my peer research supervision group in order to challenge my interpretations of the data and actively seek out alternative ways of making sense of the data. In terms of reporting the data, I used extracts throughout chapter 4, explicitly demonstrating how my findings were grounded in the data.

3.7.3 Transparency and Coherence

Transparency and coherence were achieved in the current research project by being explicit about each stage of the research process from the decision to focus on cyberstalking at the outset, to the writing up of the conclusion. I provided plentiful extracts from the transcripts, giving appropriate context to the participant's voices and enabling the reader to see how the data was interpreted.

It is anticipated that this has achieved reader resonance. Reflexivity is vital in achieving transparency and this is addressed in 3.9 and 5.5. Coherence also refers to the fit between the research question, the philosophical perspective adopted and the method of investigation and analysis undertaken (Yardley, 2000). Section 3.3 highlighted how my paradigmatic position and choice of methodology were appropriate in terms of addressing the topic under scrutiny.

3.7.4 Impact and Importance

Yardley (2000) suggests that there are many ways in which impact and importance may be achieved including theoretical merit, practical worth or socio-cultural impact. Yardley (2000) postulates that “the decisive criterion by which any piece of research must be judged is arguably its impact and utility” (p.223). As stated in chapter 2, there is a dearth of research on the current topic of enquiry and the current study aims to address this. It is anticipated that this will facilitate a better understanding of this phenomenon, the psychological impact for the victim and inform clinical interventions.

3.8 Ethics

Ethical approval was granted from the University of East London (see appendix G, H & I). The participant invitation letter described the nature of the study and all participants signed the consent form (appendix A) prior to participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process and that all material discussed during the interview would be treated with limited confidentiality. In order to protect anonymity,

participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms and identifying features have been removed from transcripts. During the research process, participants' details, transcripts and taped recordings were stored on my password protected computer, stored securely at home. Taped recordings of the interview were destroyed after transcription.

I was aware of the sensitive nature of the topic being explored and that the interview process could elicit painful memories for participants and was tactful and diplomatic throughout. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they would like details of counselling services available in their local area. All participants declined this invitation.

3.9 Reflexivity

There are two types of reflexivity; personal and epistemological (Willig, 2013) and the former will be considered in this chapter with the latter being addressed in chapter 5. Reflexivity requires the researcher to reflect upon the ways in which their social background, positioning and assumptions impact upon the research process in order to minimise the impact (Finlay & Gough, 2003). When potential biases are identified, researchers must make every attempt to bracket them from their research in order to preserve the data (Kasket, 2012; Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). While it is acknowledged that this can only ever be partially achieved, as researchers do not exist in a vacuum and will always have a perception of the world (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009), it succeeds in leading them away from the distraction of their own assumptions and attitudes and facilitates a focus on the essence of a participant's experience of a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). To achieve this, I was therefore mindful of how I might be

influencing the research process and aimed to limit this by keeping a journal of reflexive notes and engaging in on-going dialogue with my research supervisor and peer researchers. I tried to hold in mind at all stages of the research process how the various strands of my identity (listed below) could be impacting upon the research process:

- Trainee counselling psychologist
- Thirty-eight years old
- Married
- White British female
- Living in London

These identities may have influenced my data collection in terms of what was or wasn't discussed in interviews and how data was analysed. I was also mindful of how my attitude towards cyberstalking might be impacting upon the research process. I had been horrified and appalled at the proliferation of cyberstalking incidents reported in the press and the upset caused to victims. I was incredulous at the lengths cyberstalkers seemed prepared to go to to hurt those they targeted. The torment seemed to occur over a protracted period of time and I sympathised with the victims, many of whom appeared to have been targeted indiscriminately. I wondered if the anonymity afforded by the internet was facilitating malicious cyberstalking behaviour and wondered about the mechanisms underpinning perpetrators' actions. The government and other bodies seemed unable to stop perpetrators and hold them accountable for their actions. I watched televised documentaries, read press coverage and engaged in discussions with friends, family and colleagues about cyberstalking. I was surprised and troubled by the reaction of some people who seemed to imply that victims should be flattered in

some way for the 'attention' they were receiving. Additionally, some people appeared to dismiss or trivialise cyberstalking behaviour, suggesting that those targeted could simply turn off their pc or phone in order to end the abuse. I wondered how those affected by cyberstalking felt about such perceptions and attitudes.

I remained mindful throughout the process that if I wanted to gain a rich understanding of a victim's experience, I needed to try to bracket my fore-structures and focus on my participants' experiences and how they made sense of their experiences. I aimed to step into their shoes and see the world from their perspective in order to elicit the experience of being cyberstalked. How did they experience being cyberstalked, what was it like and what meanings did they attach to their experiences? I wanted to conduct an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences by engaging with and examining my participants' rich accounts. I aimed to tap into, uncover and examine the individual facets that comprised their experiences while also examining their holistic experience of being cyberstalked in its entirety. Ultimately, I strove to explore, in detail, the complex and multifaceted lived experience of being cyberstalked, as reported by my participants.

Data obtained from the five interviews is presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the results of an interpretative phenomenological analysis of five transcripts exploring the experience of being cyberstalked. Three superordinate themes and eleven subthemes emerged. The diagram below illustrates the overlapping nature of the themes. Such overlap seemed to aptly symbolise the invading and pervasive nature of the topic under scrutiny. Theme two was placed between themes one and three and overlaid to indicate its centrality and prominence within accounts.

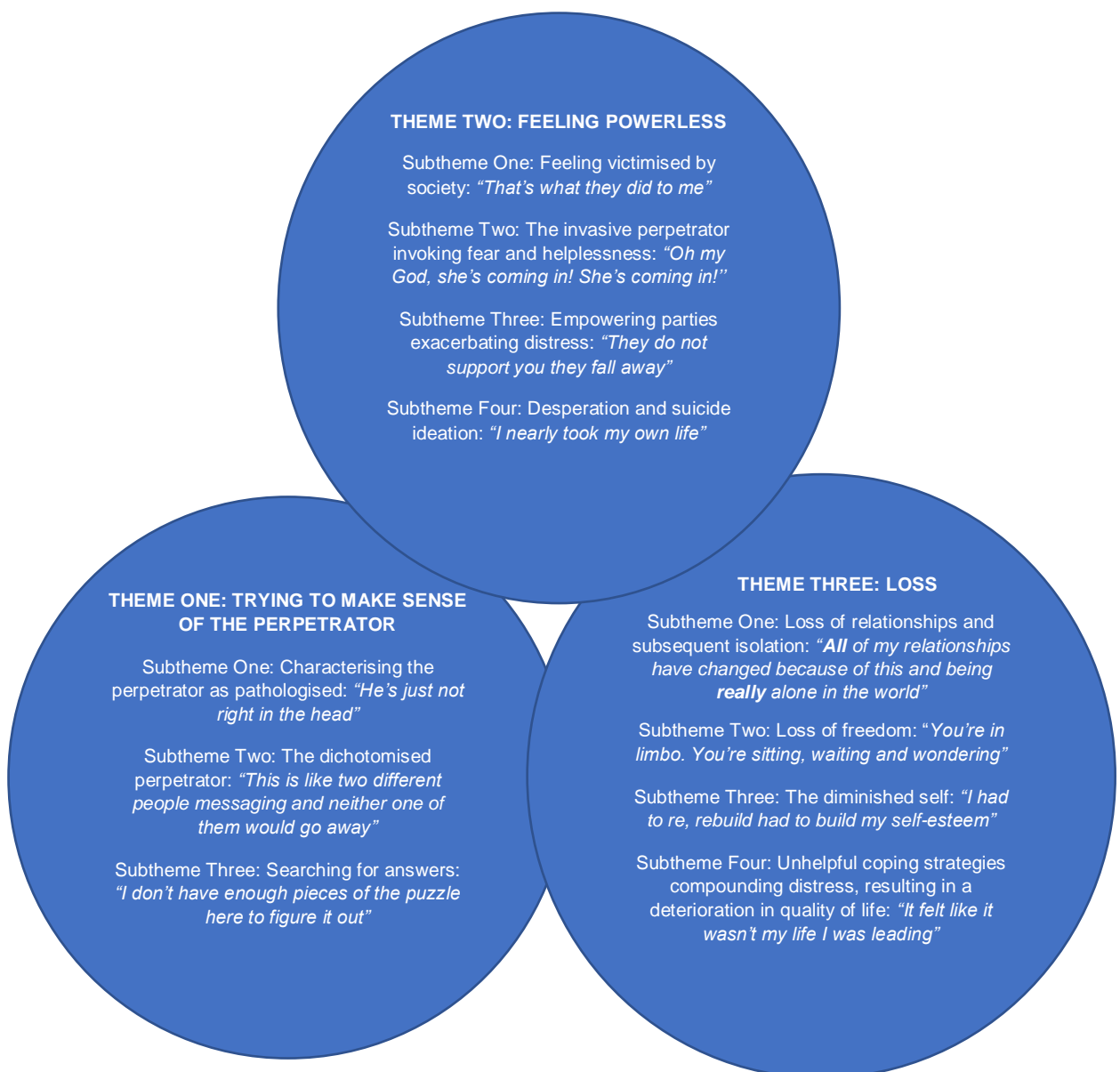


Figure 1. Diagram of themes and subthemes

4.2 Superordinate Theme One: Trying to make sense of the perpetrator

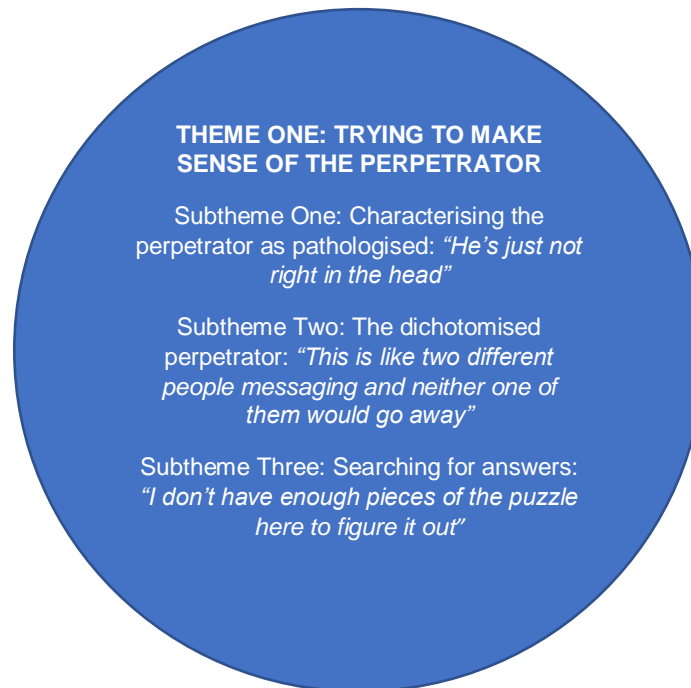


Figure 2. Diagram of theme one and subthemes

Theme one depicts the participants' attempts to make sense of the perpetrator and their behaviour. The perpetrators were characterised as pathologised and dichotomised from the participants and dichotomies were identified within the perpetrators. It was clear that participants had given considerable thought to the perpetrator and their behaviour in trying to make sense of their experience but that questions remained, the answers to which seem to elude them.

4.2.1 Subtheme One: Characterising the perpetrator as pathologised: ***"He's just not right in the head"***

Within all participant accounts, with the exception of Steve, the perpetrator was characterised as pathologised. Terms such as 'mental', 'crazy', 'nuts', 'schizo', 'weird', 'odd', 'quirky', 'bizarre' and 'creepy' were employed in abundance throughout their narratives to describe the perpetrator's character or behaviour.

Kirsty said:

Extract 1

Kirsty: *I think I genuinely [laughs] think he is I think he might have some sort of like disorder like schizo schizophrenic or something (1087-1088)*

Extract 2

Kirsty: *And I don't want to hear from him, he creeps me out. He's just not right in the head (475-476)*

The terms Kirsty uses here such as 'creeps me out', 'not right in the head' 'disorder', 'schizo' and 'schizophrenic' seem to depict the perpetrator as an unstable and pathologised Other. Her uncertainty of what sort of 'disorder' he may have is emphasised by her repetition of 'like' and use of 'some sort' and 'or something'. Kirsty became upset at times and I wondered if she was using humour in extract 1 to defend against the pain of her experience. Kirsty struggled to understand why she had been targeted and identified various possible motives throughout the interview but kept returning to his mental health as the most likely reason. The amount of thought she has given to deciphering the perpetrator's mental health is perhaps highlighted by her repetition of 'think'.

Rafiq's depiction of the perpetrator as pathologised is apparent when he describes her behaviour below:

Extract 3

Rafiq: *there was a few things that creeped me out, one was the behaviour, like these things about like sending me er messages online saying I'm going crazy, erm cause you're thinking this person's crazy and then you've got, actually got this person telling you, 'I'm going crazy', right? (360-364)*

Extract 4

Rafiq: *I **read** a lot about it while it was happening. Erm I'm not a psychologist but I had the sense that maybe it was someone just like kind of borderline personality disorder from I was just looking at symptoms and, and things that I'd seen and I don't know much about these but that, that and the, and I er I read **a lot** about those things And erm I did read a lot (2587-2598)*

Rafiq uses the same terms 'creep(ed)' me out' as Kirsty to describe how his perpetrator left him feeling. His choosing to report that the perpetrator told him she's 'going crazy' perhaps aims to substantiate his opinion of the perpetrator's mental health status and I got the impression he was trying to convince me. His repetition of 'I (did) read a lot' and the emphasis he placed on 'a lot' perhaps suggests that he did a lot of searching to make sense of her behaviour. It's as if he needed for there to be something wrong with the perpetrator and label her with a specific mental health diagnosis in order to make sense of 'the behaviour'.

In contrast to Rafiq and Kirsty who characterise the perpetrator as pathologised, Barbara believes that the perpetrator does not have mental health issues but that the perpetrator presents herself as 'mentally ill' to others to avoid being held accountable for cyberstalking Barbara. In this sense, it is the perpetrator that characterises *herself* as pathologised.

Extract 5

Barbara: *If she was mentally ill, she wouldn't have the capability to do what she's doing. She wouldn't have the capability to set up all those intricate websites, all those emails, all those things that she's done to me and my family. If she was that mentally ill, she wouldn't be able to do that (593-596)*

Extract 6

Barbara: *I think she's a good actress. I think she's dead good at convincing people she has something wrong with her but for goodness sake, no. When I knew her at the community centre there was no indication of mental illness, she never spoke about people eating mice or anything, this is a lot of nonsense. This is a way of her convincing people that she's mad so she can get off with everything and she does it, she gets off all the time. I mean, sectioned for 28 days, she was out in 14. You know, so she's very, very good at coming across she comes across as being so plausible you wouldn't think there was anything and I don't think there is I don't think she has got a mental illness. I think she uses that she uses the nonsense of people eating mice and everything - for goodness sake, that's just not something she would say. You know, this is, this is a way of getting off without having to be held accountable for things (912-924)*

Barbara sounds angry that the perpetrator is falsely characterising herself as 'mentally ill', as 'a way of getting off without having to be held accountable for

things'. Depicting the perpetrator as 'a good actress' who's 'dead good at convincing people' highlights the extent to which Barbara feels that the perpetrator constructs a made-up, false self that is juxtaposed to the person Barbara used to know at the community centre. Barbara's repetition of 'good' and 'very' underscores how proficient she thinks the perpetrator is at deceiving others. Her use of 'dead good' links this proficiency with death and later Barbara talks of feeling suicidal (see 4.3.4) perhaps implying the impact of the perpetrator's deception on Barbara's life. Barbara appears to become muddled about whether the perpetrator is good at pretending to be 'plausible' or good at pretending to have 'a mental illness'. This perhaps demonstrates Barbara's confusion about who the perpetrator really is.

In the same way that Barbara calls into question the perpetrator's claim to be 'mentally ill', Elaine questions if her perpetrator's diagnosis of bipolar disorder is authentic:

Extract 7

Elaine: it's such a erm a well-orchestrated erm crime that I I'm amazed I'm impressed I didn't give him that much credit erm you know and so I have to wonder whether the bipolar was even just fake you know (745-747)

Elaine speaks quietly and in a deep voice here, emphasising the seriousness of her suggestion that her ex-husband might have falsified a mental health disorder. Her voice cracks, perhaps suggesting the emotional impact of this thought and a difficulty expressing it, her words seeming to get stuck in her throat. Her description of the crime as 'well-orchestrated' is suggestive of a rehearsed performance with his mental health diagnosis being part of the performance.

In contrast to the perpetrators who were characterised as pathologised, participants positioned themselves as the 'normal' party who conducted themselves appropriately. Subtheme two examines how participants perceived

perpetrators to be dichotomised from themselves, predominantly in terms of mental health and also how dichotomies seemed to exist within the perpetrators.

4.2.2 Subtheme Two: The dichotomised perpetrator: *“This is like two different people messaging and neither one of them would go away”*

All participants presented themselves as being dichotomised from the perpetrator in some form or other. Kirsty seemed to engage in a debate throughout the interview regarding what constitutes ‘normal’ and ‘not normal’ behaviour. She vehemently positioned herself as the ‘normal’ party who followed a socially appropriate code of conduct when interacting with others, as opposed to the juxtaposed perpetrator whom she characterises as an abnormal and socially inappropriate Other. She said:

Extract 8

Kirsty: the day I reported it to the police and erm it was because he had messaged me again a text message or an email and I wrote back and I said look what you’re doing isn’t normal? I don’t I’m obviously not interested in carrying on a conversation with you (247-250)

Her use of ‘obviously’ seemed to emphasise how clearly she feels she was communicating to the perpetrator that she wasn’t interested in engaging with him. She links contacting the police with the perpetrator’s behaviour not being ‘normal’ seeming to highlight how serious his abnormal behaviour was to her. The questioning way in which Kirsty says ‘what you’re doing isn’t normal’ suggested to me that she was looking for some reassurance from me that the perpetrator ‘isn’t normal, inviting me to agree with her and position myself alongside her and contrary to the perpetrator. On occasions, Kirsty briefly wondered how she might have contributed to the perpetrator’s behaviour but did not stay with such musings

for long before retreating to the safety of pathologising the perpetrator and exonerating herself. Later, she said:

Extract 9

Kirsty: *I just kept thinking I would **never** treat somebody like this, I would **never** keep contacting somebody if only for my own self-respect like I just wanted to say to him respect yourself [laughs] and stop messaging me (503-509)*

The repetition of and emphasis placed on ‘never’ seems to highlight just how far removed she believes the perpetrator’s behaviour is from that of her own. Her laugh appears to downplay how much his intrusive behaviour has affected her, but given how upset she becomes later on, perhaps defends against the pain of her experience.

The dichotomised positions that Elaine and her perpetrator acknowledge occupying in relation to one another is highlighted in extract 10:

Extract 10

Elaine: *I see what he was talking about now...he was saying that he was going to switch places with me so now I’m I’m the one who’s erm got to prove my sanity and he’s looking like he’s the stable one (1538-1541)*

Here Elaine explains how her perpetrator explicitly vocalised a desire to ‘switch places’ with her, thereby categorically identifying them as occupying contrasting positions. Her description of him ‘looking like he’s the stable one’ implies that a fundamental aspect of them switching places consists of how they both appear to others in terms of their mental health. It seems that within Elaine and her ex-husband’s relationship, there is only space for one ‘stable’ person with the other person by default positioned as unstable. And later, she identifies his rationale for wanting to ‘switch places’ with her:

Extract 11

Elaine: *he said I am going to drive you crazy...and I said **why?** I said **why?** I mean I shouldn’t have said anything but you know I said **why?** and he said because erm [pause] you got me addicted to psychotropic... medicine for erm [pause] for his bipolar disorder I’m like I didn’t prescribe it all I did*

*was recommend a psychiatrist [laughs] you know so I'm like alright that's not very rational...He feels that if not for **me** erm he wouldn't have this diagnosis because I'm the one that persuaded him to go for treatment (448-466)*

Elaine's repetition of and the emphasis she places on 'why' perhaps highlights her difficulty in making sense of her cyberstalker wishing to 'drive (her) crazy'. Her mentioning of him having bipolar disorder, recommending him to see a psychiatrist and of his behaviour being 'not very rational', positions the perpetrator as the pathologised Other that she is polarised from.

All participants except Steve highlighted not only dichotomies between themselves and the perpetrator, but also within the perpetrator too. In extract 12, Kirsty seems to struggle to make sense of her perpetrator's apparently conflicting behaviour.

Extract 12

Kirsty: he was so all over the place like I'd get horrible abusive messages and then real lovey-dovey nice messages and I would think this is like two different people messaging and neither one of them would go away [laughs] neither one of them would go away it was just bizarre (1149-1160)

Here Kirsty contrasts malevolent 'horrible, abusive messages' with benevolent 'lovey-dovey, nice messages', depicting his inconsistent behaviour as 'so all over the place' and 'bizarre'. The difference in such behaviour is deemed to be so dichotomised that she imagines it to come from two entirely different people. Her repetition of 'neither one of them would go away' is perhaps indicative of her experiencing two different people and a desire for both of them to disappear. I wondered if this left her feeling 'all over the place', confused by his apparently conflicting messages.

In a similar vein to the dichotomised behaviour of Kirsty's perpetrator, Rafiq said:

Extract 13

Rafiq: her stare was unlike anything I've ever and it could that, that really erm like, it was like anger or something I don't know how to explain it but

it was like anger or just hate, it was like hatred so it was, it was like this deep hatred and on the one hand but then I'd get this love letter you know, on the other hand. And er I remember, I remember it just made, made my sk skin crawl, that really did (434-446)

Here Rafiq attempts to explain the perpetrator's dichotomised behaviour, seeming to display to him 'anger' and 'deep hatred' on the one hand and love on the other. He struggles to explain 'her stare' and stumbles over his words stating 'I don't know how to explain it', emphasising how confusing he found her behaviour. His repetition of 'hatred' and 'anger' and single use of 'love' perhaps implies him experiencing a dominance of hatred and anger over love from the dichotomised perpetrator. His reference to this making his 'skin crawl' perhaps suggests his revulsion of the love letter and her stare.

In trying to make sense of their experience, questions remained and subtheme three addresses the participants search to find answers to these questions.

4.2.3 Subtheme Three: Searching for answers: *"I don't have enough pieces of the puzzle here to figure it out"*

Throughout all accounts, participants reported distress emanating from unanswered questions relating to the perpetrator's behaviour. For Kirsty, her distress derived from being unable to establish her perpetrator's motive.

Extract 14

*Kirsty: I think the bit I struggled with the most was trying to figure out how [pause] his mind worked to act this way like I kept trying to think what would make him stop doing it? how could I word it to him to make him realise that he doesn't want to contact me really? and probably what he's doing is out of weird like erm habit I suppose I don't know erm so I that's the bit I struggled with the most not how I could get him to go away but **why is he doing this?** I just couldn't put myself in his position and figure out why he was doing it? (532-542)*

Kirsty asked herself several times throughout her interview what may have motivated the perpetrator to target her. The use of 'like', 'I suppose' and 'I don't

know' suggests her lack of confidence in 'habit' underpinning his behaviour. She asks herself multiple questions here and her emphasis on 'why is he doing this?' and repetition of 'figure out' is perhaps indicative of her need and struggle to make sense of his behaviour. Her raised intonation in line 537 suggested to me that she was perhaps asking me why I thought he targeted her and exemplifies her ongoing need to find answers. I wondered if she perceived me to be an 'expert' as a cyberstalking researcher or a psychologist who she hoped might be able to answer her questions.

In Elaine's case, the perpetrator had been explicit about his motive to 'drive her crazy' (line 448). The most problematic aspect for her was trying to ascertain who else he had involved to stalk her by proxy and how different facets of her experience were linked. She said:

Extract 15

Elaine: I'm rooted in logic so it's it's erm not erm [tut] it's not particularly comfortable for me not to be able to solve a puzzle cos of my natural tendency is like well let me figure this out, I don't have enough pieces of the puzzle here to figure it out I think I can make some fair and educated guesses but aga again the not knowing, it's the same as like once you've beat cancer and there's there's a big [tut] you know erm [tut] wild card where you just don't know, you just don't know you have to find out, you can't you can't control that you can't control when if somebody's going to decide to kill you you can't just you can't you you know (1086-1094)

As with Kirsty, Elaine mentions and repeats her need to 'figure (this/it) out'. She analogises her experience of being stalked, to solving a jigsaw puzzle and this perhaps implies that she perceives stalking as being comprised of multiple interlocking facets. Elaine spoke earlier of being stalked by proxy by multiple perpetrators (180) and I wondered if the puzzle might also symbolise the network of perpetrators stalking her, the missing pieces representing the perpetrators that she's unable to identify. Elaine sounded frustrated and tuts throughout extract 15, which seems to emphasise her frustration at being unable to 'figure (it) out'.

Elaine also seems to analogise the 'not knowing' part of her experience to the 'wild card' after 'you've beat cancer' in terms of the lack of control she seems to feel is inherent in both experiences. The repetition of 'don't know' and 'you can't control' (that) seems to emphasise the link she feels exists between the 'not knowing' and feeling out of control. The extent to which she finds the 'not knowing' persecutory and life threatening is perhaps exemplified in her linking it to a terminal illness.

Throughout Barbara's narrative, the 'not knowing' seemed to represent a key aspect of her experience and she stated 'I don't know' several times throughout. After finding out that the perpetrator had accused Barbara of stalking *her*, the police subsequently charged Barbara. She said:

Extract 16

Barbara: *I was constantly on the hunt, I suppose, to try and find out what was out there that she had done under my name. I constantly googled everything under various names to try and find out if my photo was on anything, if my details were on anything. Yes, it was very difficult, it affected me quite badly, I was put on antidepressants because, er, things, kind of, got out of control a wee bit, I was just constantly worried about what was coming next, or what she had done to me, or what she was going to do to me (488-494)*

Barbara's description of being 'on the hunt' and repetition of 'constantly' highlights her ongoing pursuit to establish what the perpetrator had 'done' or 'was going to do' to her. The mental health distress created in engaging in the search is apparent when she reveals that she was 'put on antidepressants' and describes feeling 'constantly worried' and that things got 'out of control'. She sounds desperate to establish what was 'out there' and what the perpetrator had done or was going to do to her and consumed by worry.

Overall perpetrators were positioned as pathologised by participants or the perpetrators themselves. Interestingly, the perpetrators who were either sectioned or given a mental health diagnosis from a professional were either not

believed by the participants to have mental health problems or they queried the genuineness of the diagnosis. Perpetrators were also deemed to be dichotomised from participants and this largely stemmed from a perception of compromised mental health. Additionally, dichotomies within the perpetrator were noted throughout narratives. In making sense of the perpetrator and their experience, participants identified various unanswered questions and seemed to struggle to piece things together, which seemed to contribute to a sense of powerlessness.

4.3 Superordinate Theme Two: Feeling powerless

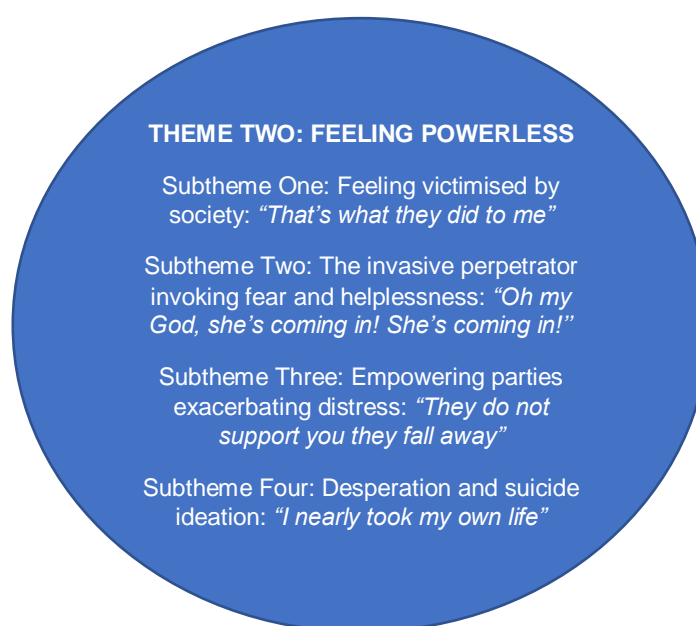


Figure 3. Diagram of theme two and subthemes

A sense of powerlessness and vulnerability was apparent in all accounts and seemed to be at the heart of their experience. This section begins by contextualising the participant's experience of being cyberstalked by presenting data illuminating how they felt victimised by society. Throughout their accounts, there was a sense of participants fighting a stronger, intrusive perpetrator evoking fear and helplessness and a desperation at feeling unable to end the torment.

Empowering parties such as the police force, advocates and professionals appeared to exacerbate their powerlessness and feelings of anger and frustration were reported.

4.3.1 Subtheme One: Feeling victimised: “*That’s what they did to me*”

Participants were not asked if they felt victimised or marginalised by society and yet all participants with the exception of Kirsty reported feeling victimised. This seemed an important element to capture as it appeared to form the backdrop of how they constructed and made sense of their experience of being cyberstalked. Here Elaine describes how she sees herself in relation to others within her community:

Extract 17

Elaine: *I spent 25 years in this house in the country isolated from anything that that was my first husband’s doing that, I never wanted to be here I’m I’m like and here I am you know the lone Jew in this white, Christian, fundamentalist town with surrounded by Nazis and devil worshipers* (1179-1183)

Elaine differentiates herself from others, describing herself as ‘isolated’ and ‘the lone Jew’. She paints a picture of being marginalised, sounding powerless, victimised and unable to defend herself within society. Her stating that ‘she never wanted to be here’ and that it was her ‘first husband’s doing’ suggests a powerlessness in her past relationship with her husband. The secluded house seems to symbolise her position in society, teetering uncomfortably on the fringes, cut off and threatened by oppositional and persecutory Others.

Steve reported that he was cyberstalked on the basis of his sexuality and here he expresses his views about homophobic attitudes in society:

Extract 18

Steve: *all those people who went and fought the second world war actually did it for **nothing** because I’m sorry but the discrimination is as rife today a a as it was perhaps when man first came out of their cave and said*

there's a queer bash him up I don't think that the mentality has has ever changed and... I'm sorry but you can't get into the police force if you have any sympathy whatsoever towards minority groups (483-490)

Steve describes here his belief that discrimination against homosexuals is as prevalent now as it was thousands of years ago and sounds angry. His use of 'bash him up' and reference to the 'second world war' perhaps indicates how persecuted he feels by society. Throughout Steve's narrative he describes feeling 'invaded' (41) and 'attacked' (e.g. 45, 64) and uses terms such as 'fight the fight' (216) and at times I wondered if he was referring more generally to his experience of battling against homophobia rather than his specific experience of being cyberstalked. Steve's emphasis on 'nothing' perhaps infers how powerless he feels as a gay man in society and perhaps a sense of powerlessness to change the situation.

While Steve and Elaine referred to their sexuality, ethnicity and faith when answering questions relating to their experience of being cyberstalked, Barbara did not present herself as a minority group. However, Barbara saturated the interview with terms such as 'did to me' and 'done to' and reported experiences of being mistreated by others. This seemed to suggest how heavily victimised she felt. She described having had an offline stalker in the past who had been imprisoned for attacking her. She said:

Extract 19

Barbara: Having one stalker was bad enough, I've had one for 30 years, but he, as I say, is a different type of stalker, he's nothing to do with computers...He's due to get out of prison next year, he's a terrorist...he's held me at gunpoint, he stabbed me and [pause] yeah, he's done all of those things. I've been held hostage, I've been stabbed, I've had a whole lot of things happen to me (320-338)

Here Barbara sounds vulnerable and powerless against a dangerous and more powerful Other. She paints a picture of being terrorised by a violent stalker for a

protracted period of time and from whom she was unable to protect herself. Barbara sounds fragile here, her voice quivers indicating how distressing she found these experiences. Her assertion that she's had 'a whole lot of things happen to me' perhaps implies that there are other things that have happened in her life beyond her experiences of being stalked and cyberstalked and I wondered how else she might have been victimised.

The following subtheme captures the fear and helplessness elicited by the invasive perpetrator.

4.3.2 Subtheme Two: The invasive perpetrator invoking fear and helplessness: *"Oh my God, she's coming in! She's coming in!"*

All participants reported feeling powerless in some form or other against the might of the invasive perpetrator and described feeling fearful and helplessness. The extent to which Steve felt under siege from the perpetrator was very apparent throughout his narrative where he painted a picture of being caught up in a bloody battle with the perpetrator. He referred to guns, death threats and break ins and sounded helpless to the might of the intrusive and relentless perpetrator. He said:

Extract 20

Steve: *we were awake 24 hours a day wondering when an attack was going to come* (588-589)

Steve describes not being able to rest and this seems to suggest the all-consuming nature of his experience and a necessity to remain alert to protect himself. His description of 'when' rather than 'if' suggests his certainty that 'an attack' would take place and being powerless to stopping it. His account sounds almost reminiscent of soldiers on a battle field preparing for the advancing, invading army.

While Steve seems to use fighting in a battle or a war to symbolise the intrusion and fear invoked, Rafiq describes a virus that pervaded his life:

Extract 21

Rafiq: *it was traumatic, yeah, because er 'cause it, it got, it got into like in, it was like this virus that infiltrated like erm these parts of my life, like my work, I can't go into my office. That space has gone...and the fact that someone had gone like **so** deep into your life er and erm tried to stabe, destabilise like you, your relationships with people. That's what I found traumatic (1648-1664)*

Rafiq's repetition of 'traumatic' in this extract and the confident way in which he chooses this word to describes his experience seems to suggest a crystallised grasp of the emotional toll of being targeted. Contrarily, his difficulty in elaborating on why it is 'traumatic' seems to suggest a complex experience that is difficult to put into words. His description of the stalking as a 'virus' implies a malevolent, pervasive and uncontrollable entity, contaminating the areas it comes into contact with. His portrayal of the perpetrator as going 'so deep into your life', placing an emphasis on 'so' perhaps highlights how intruded upon he felt. He explains the consequences as destabilising 'your relationships with people' although his preceding Freudian slip of 'destabilise like you' perhaps suggests that the intrusion destabilised him as a person as well.

As with all participants, Rafiq was also stalked offline and described an instance of the cyberstalker arriving at one of his Tai-chi classes:

Extract 22

Rafiq: *just by luck I just looked out the window and I thought oh my God, she's coming in! She's coming **in**! And like I had this kind of like queasy er like not particularly nice feeling (198-200)*

Rafiq's panic at the imminent intrusion of his cyberstalker is apparent in extract 22 and he sounds alarmed. The repetition of 'she's coming in' and his stating 'oh my God' seems to emphasise the fear invoked and his helplessness to preventing

her from entering. His physiological reaction of feeling queasy implies a need to vomit and perhaps a desire to rid himself of her.

The invasive perpetrator invoking fear and a sense of helplessness was apparent in Barbara's account and she reported people turning up at her home:

Extract 23

Barbara: *She emailed a man on Myspace from Mumbai [laughter], and he came across all the way from India to my house...He says, "You're Valerie's house-keeper?" I said, "No" I said, "This is my house" "No, no" he says, "She said you would say that" He says, "Let me in!" [Laughter] I had to phone the police, because the poor man didn't understand, she had convinced to him that by talking to him over the internet, that I was her...And it was hellish, I mean, I had emails from all sorts of people, all sorts of websites, all sorts of dating people, all sorts of filthy sites, that just want to that she put my name on, and put all my details on, and, erm, there was men wanting to do things to me, and I was frightened to even turn on my computer...I was frightened to even turn it on, didn't know what was gonna come next (101-117)*

The extent to which Barbara's perpetrator pervaded boundaries is very apparent here, as she reports how her perpetrator manipulated and incited others into crossing geographical, cultural and physical boundaries. The distance that a man from Mumbai flew and the costs that he incurred in doing so is suggestive of how manipulative the perpetrator is to convince someone to embark on such a trip. It perhaps also mirrors the extreme lengths the perpetrator has gone to and the steep emotional cost that Barbara has paid in being victimised in this way. I wondered if she used humour here as a defence to cope with the pain of her experience.

Her repetition of 'all sorts of' 'people' and '(web) sites' seems to suggest she felt bombarded by multiple parties with a deluge of emails and this seems to highlight the extent to which she felt under siege. Her description of this as 'hellish' and repetition of 'frightened' emphasises how fearful she felt about 'even' turning on her computer. 'Hellish' could be perceived as a strong word to describe her experience and perhaps underscores just how frightening she found the

intrusions. The not knowing 'what was gonna come next' also seems to have elicited fear in Barbara and seems to have created a sense of helplessness. In extract 20 Steve reported his surety of 'when' (rather than 'if') an attack would occur and similarly Barbara sounds sure that there will be more emails.

4.3.3 Subtheme Three: Empowering parties exacerbating powerlessness:

"They do not support you they fall away"

All participants except Kirsty reported dissatisfaction with organisations designed to support them such as advocacy services, anti-stalking organisations and the police, which seemed to exacerbate their position of powerlessness. For Elaine, it appeared to be the insufficient expertise and knowledge of advocates and professionals that compounded her disempowerment. She became angry when she spoke of her experiences with them:

Extract 24

Elaine: *I want to voice now is the my **anger** towards all the advocates and the professionals...that are regurgitating what they've been told without thinking it through...they **have** their agenda and it their agenda is this is how we see stalkers and these five you know five categories and anything else doesn't fit in we're not even going to look at that...**don't tell me that**...people are not getting stalked by multiple perpetrators, that it doesn't exist and that's their tack because they have their agenda and nobody's really very scientific about it (961-984)*

Extract 25

Elaine: *professionals taking advantage erm not caring...and on and on with the victim advocates even, nobody knows which end is up I'm you know I'm trying to [pause] educate them...I'm trying to get support from people who are **that** ignorant, they're **that** in the dark (920-929)*

Elaine's sounds furious here and her narrative is littered with disparaging remarks about advocates and professionals whom she describes as 'ignorant', 'in the dark', 'not caring', 'taking advantage', 'regurgitating...without thinking' and having 'their agenda'. Elaine's reference to trying to educate the advocates demonstrates that she feels she knows more than them and the emphasis she

places on 'that' seems to highlight her anger and frustration about this. Her description of 'nobody knows which end is up' is perhaps indicative of the role reversal that appears to have unfolded with *her* educating *them*. Rather than empowering her, their insufficient knowledge and expertise relating to multiple perpetrators invalidates her experience and compounds her powerless position. Some participants reported that their perpetrators accused *them* of stalking their perpetrators and made allegations to the police and approached anti-stalking organisations making false claims about being victimised. Consequently, these participants were investigated or arrested by the police and/or turned away by anti-stalking organisations and advocacy services when they approached them for support. Steve reported that his perpetrator was invited to talk at an anti-stalking conference on his experience of how *he* had targeted *them*. The extent to which organisations were reported to disbelieve the participants and by contrast, offer support to the perpetrators appeared to compound their position of disempowerment. When I asked Steve what the worst aspect of his experience was, he replied:

Extract 26

Steve: *the worst thing about it all is that when you have **all** these organisations and you have **all** the authorities turning around police, stalking organisations, the government, erm ministers all police er police commissioners all standing up saying you know these people erm you know must be protected they've got rights when **all** that comes down to it they **all** fall away and either maybe some of them as I say support the action against you not not sort of saying it publicly erm but others just fall away and because of that you have no support. They do not support you they fall away (679-686)*

Extract 27

Steve: *the authorities who are there who go on day after day saying look at this look at that how we're doing this for these people, victim support we never even saw a victim support counsellor! (421-424)*

Steve angrily described here how unsupported he felt by multiple parties from the police and commissioners to anti-stalking organisations. His repetition of, and

emphasis on 'all' during extract 26, perhaps highlights his experience that organisations without exception 'do not support you, they fall away'. He suggests that such organisations portray themselves as wanting to protect the rights of victims but that in actual fact they 'support the action against you', exacerbating his sense of powerlessness. He also sounded angry in extract 27 when he reflects on how he feels the authorities 'go on day after day' purporting to support victims when he 'never even saw a victim support counsellor!' His anger seeming to derive not only from insufficient support but also from organisations claiming to provide support for victims when, in his experience, this isn't the case.

Barbara also reported being falsely accused of stalking perpetration by the perpetrator and described being repeatedly arrested by the police:

Extract 28

Barbara: *I was constantly getting lifted by the police and questioned, my DNA, my fingerprints taken, and all because it wasn't me (77-78)*

Extract 29

Barbara: *They took my laptop, they took my phone, they took, they took everything. And for two years I heard nothing, and then I just got told it was all dropped (46-48)*

In total Barbara mentions being 'lifted' by the police seven times throughout the interview and her repeated use of this term is perhaps indicative of her experience of 'constantly' being arrested and taken to the police station. To be lifted by another (in the traditional sense), the lifter needs to be physically stronger, heavier and more robust than the person being lifted who is usually smaller and lighter. The employment of 'lifted' rather than 'arrested' or 'charged' perhaps implies a perception of a physical power imbalance between herself and the police where the latter are deemed to be strong, robust and powerful in comparison to herself who is weak, vulnerable and powerless to being 'lifted'.

Barbara says 'took' four times in extract 29 and this seems to illuminate just how stripped she feels. Her experience of hearing 'nothing' and then 'just got told' again seems to underscore her powerless position. Her reference to charges being 'dropped' perhaps implies the physical way in which she experiences being put down and repositioned by the police after being 'lifted'. Later Barbara describes what happened when she was arrested:

Extract 30

Barbara: *when I was arrested, erm, [pause] I was taken into the, erm, room of the cells, you call it, and I was strip-searched by the police. I was examined internally by a police officer, not by a doctor, in a filthy, dirty cell. I was left standing in the cold with no clothes on while they physically examined me to make sure I had no hidden weapons [sigh]. That's a big complaint that was in, but they said they have to do that to everybody - I don't think they do. But that's what they did to me. So that's all the experience I had to go through because of what she did to me (1101-1109)*

Barbara's voice quivered and she looked on the verge of tears when she told me about this part of her experience; her vulnerability and fragility apparent. The picture that Barbara paints of being strip searched involuntarily is poignant and implies a sense of being mistreated by a more powerful Other. The pauses and 'erm's perhaps suggest a struggle to articulate her experience and when she mentioned 'filthy' and 'dirty' I wondered if she felt sullied by her experience and ashamed in some way. Her description of being 'left standing in the cold' evokes a sense of Barbara feeling uncared for and abandoned. Her sigh is perhaps indicative of the emotional burden of this experience and a desire to rid herself of it. Later she said:

Extract 31

Barbara: *when it was all over and I was told I could go and collect my laptop, the laptop was locked! There was a police lock on it, [laughter]. So, I had to go away to the head-quarters, we waited for an hour 'til the cybercrime team unlocked it. Then it was damaged, the keys were damaged, and they said, "well, you can't prove it was us." you know. So, I was left with a laptop that really was pretty new when I bought it, but by the time I got it back, it was rubbish (189-194)*

Her volume and tone of voice suggests her annoyance and disbelief that the police had locked her out of her own laptop, her laughter seeming to mask the distress of her ordeal. The impermeable boundary of the police lock perhaps symbolises the police's position of power and strength and seems juxtaposed to Barbara's position of powerlessness in demarcating her own boundaries and keeping intrusive others out. Having to 'go away' and being left waiting suggests she was given little priority. The transformation of her 'pretty new' laptop into something that was 'damaged' and 'rubbish' perhaps implies the detrimental impact that the police had on her throughout her experience. The police's apparent admission of liability for damaging her property but assertion that 'you can't prove it was us' implies police brutality and a powerful establishment misusing their position of authority against a solitary powerless individual. Rather than protecting Barbara from the perpetrator and empowering her, they seem to have exacerbated her sense of powerlessness.

In a similar vein, Steve reports how he feels he was mistreated by the police which he believes is due to their homophobic attitude:

Extract 32

Steve: *two officers came round here one day two young officers and they made a report and police notes we've got on a court order...they said erm that erm my partner's wife **me** was working at such and such a place erm and they referred to us in their notes throughout as **she** and **her!** the police I'm afraid in this country erm and also I think the CPS erm they are discriminatory and selective in their policing and their carrying out of the law (234-249)*

Extract 33

Steve: *They they they dragged him up in a in a dog van they put him in the back of a **dog van** took him up to London erm there was no evidence whatsoever they let him go almost immediately (277-279)*

Steve sounds angry here and his emphasis on 'me', 'she' and 'her' seems to highlight his disgust at his treatment by the police. The police force's strength

and brutality and Steve's partner's position of powerlessness is illuminated when he reports an instance of the police arresting his partner for allegations the perpetrator made against him. The power imbalance between the police force and Steve's partner, who was treated like an animal, is apparent in extract 33. His description of his partner being 'dragged' implies Steve's partner's protest to being treated this way. There is a sense of the police force's collective strength in treating Steve's partner as they wish and there being very little that he can do about it.

Rafiq turned to his manager for support but described feeling upset by his reaction:

Extract 34

Rafiq: *one of the things that hurt me the most about the, er, within everything, was I told my manager and then he turned around to me so she's white (the perpetrator), that's the other thing, it's the racial thing, right? He turns around to me and said 'Maybe it's a cultural maybe it's just like a cultural thing.' And I remember just feeling so upset because I thought wow, I've lived here all my life. You're basically saying it's **me** and my culture, I don't understand, I mean that's what you're basically which is for me fairly [pause] insulting. You know, born here, I've lived here all my life (344-354)*

Rafiq sounds incredulous at the response from his manager and his distress is highlighted when he identifies his manager's reaction as being 'one of the things that hurt me the most' and feeling 'so upset'. His repetition of 'I've lived here all my life' emphasises his status as a British man and highlights the incongruence between Rafiq and his manager's appraisal of the situation and the relevance of Rafiq's ethnicity. His description of 'you're basically saying it's me and my culture' is suggestive of him feeling blamed for being targeted. Later he said:

Extract 35

Rafiq: *I dunno whether it's trauma or [pause] You know, it's it's just such a disorienting it like I've never had anything before or after like that. Erm, that erm that er yeah, that, that I had a deep sense of anger towards my*

m er, those man, managers, 'cause, 'cause they were in a position to help me and erm you know erm yeah, er, an, but they went with like the most kind of like racialised narrative possible. Er, and that, that's what really upset me (1300-1309)

The false starts seem to suggest that Rafiq is having difficulty articulating his anger towards his managers for constructing a 'racialised narrative' rather than helping him. His description of 'those' 'managers' unifies individual staff members as a collective party within his work place and from whom he is separate. He begins by seeming to say 'my m (anager)' and corrects himself to state 'those' 'managers', and perhaps this implies how he once felt part of the team before feeling separated from it. His unfamiliarity in being treated this way is perhaps highlighted when he describes his experience as 'disorienting'.

4.3.4 Subtheme Four: Desperation and suicide ideation: “*I nearly took my own life*”

Throughout participant accounts with the exception of Kirsty, there were several references to death such as fears of pets being killed, pets being killed, terminal illnesses, hell, saying prayers, character assassination and suicidal thoughts.

Rafiq describes his pilgrimage to Mecca:

Extract 36

*Rafiq: I went to Mecca just by coincidence during this. And erm [pause] I'm really sorry I might choke up now, so [chuckles] [pause] But erm I just prayed for, my life [cries] er to have a good family, that I could get out of this. Erm [sniffs] [pause] that it would make me stronger. And erm that I'd have a nice family. Erm that our relationship could survive, 'cause we were n, there was **never** any, any danger that we'd ever break up or there wasn't anything like that erm erm you know, having a strong relationship and being married and having a you know, these things, they're like separate they're, they're things that you know not all relationships work, do they? Not all marriages work and stuff and not everybody has kids and all these things and stuff. And er, so w, and I, and I, one of the things I prayed for was that that if some way I could learn like who do I need in my life and, er And somehow and to p, to protect me. That was a big thing, protect me and my wife (1906-1932)*

Rafiq's decision to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca within his experience of being cyberstalked is perhaps indicative of how desperate and powerless he felt at the time. He previously mentioned '**God** I'm on my own' (1398-1399) and I wondered if he felt alone in the world except for God and if his vulnerability and sense of powerlessness prompted his pilgrimage, rather than 'coincidence'. He recounts praying for 'my life' to 'get out of this' which perhaps implies a feeling of being trapped and desperate to extricate himself from the situation in order to 'survive'. Rafiq also hopes that the experience makes him 'stronger' which suggests perhaps feelings of weakness and vulnerability and needing more strength to survive. He chuckles initially, seeming to defend against the pain of his experience before becoming upset and this is perhaps indicative of how painful this part of his experience was.

He seems to contradict himself by saying that he 'prayed that our relationship could survive', 'not all marriages work' and yet 'there was never any any danger that we'd ever break up'. I wondered if he was implying that while he felt very secure in his relationship with his wife, he was powerless to factors beyond his control and perhaps felt uncertain and fearful about the future. His reference to 'kids' also suggests he's thinking about the future and perhaps feeling fearful that the life he had anticipated is in danger. His repetition of 'protect' and description of it being 'a big thing' perhaps emphasises his vulnerability and need for protection.

While Rafiq reports going to Mecca and praying for his life, Steve considered ending his life:

Extract 37

Steve: *What we do is we we from day to day we fight the fight erm we we we we nearly got to the point where it was worth putting the guinea pigs*

into a home erm and deciding that perhaps there was a better life after this one (215-218)

Here Steve describes how he feels they are in a constant battle and 'fight the fight' every day and links this with thoughts about there being 'a better life after this one'. He sounds powerless to changing his situation and his desperation is manifested in his suicidal thoughts. His consideration of practicalities such as where his pets would live and the calm manner in which he says this, suggests he given considerable thought to suicide. The repetition of 'we', where he seems to stumble over his words, perhaps indicates him having difficulty telling me about this part of his experience.

When I asked Barbara what helped her cope, she replied:

Extract 38

Barbara: I think I I nearly took my own life, I nearly thought I thought about it and that's how bad it was at one point, because I thought I've lost my dad - he died, you know, my mum was getting elderly, my family's broken up because of this, I thought, "What is the point if this is gonna continue?" And this level of abuse on the internet is going to continue and make my life hell. And then it affected me in the physical world, because then you get charged and the police come, you know. I thought, 'When is it ever going to stop?' (602-608)

For Barbara, it seems that her powerlessness to stopping the stalking is linked to feelings of desperation and suicidal thoughts. Her repetition of 'thought' and 'nearly' perhaps indicates the amount of thought she gave to suicide and how close she came. The loss of her father, her ageing mother and the breaking up of her family also seem to be linked to her suicidal thoughts. Her description of it making her life 'hell' emphasises the level of her suffering. Barbara is religious and her selection of this word throughout her narrative, particularly when considering suicide, is perhaps suggestive of her existing in a distressing space where she perhaps feels she is no longer living.

Participants described fighting a pervasive virus or being caught up in a battle to depict their position of powerlessness, expressing fear and helplessness to stopping the intrusive perpetrator(s). Empowering parties exacerbated their sense of powerlessness by either arresting them, not believing them, supporting the perpetrators, invalidating their experience or blaming them and this created palpable anger and frustration throughout their narratives. The magnitude of their distress and desperation to end the torment was evident in their accounts describing suicide ideation.

4.4 Superordinate Theme Three: Loss

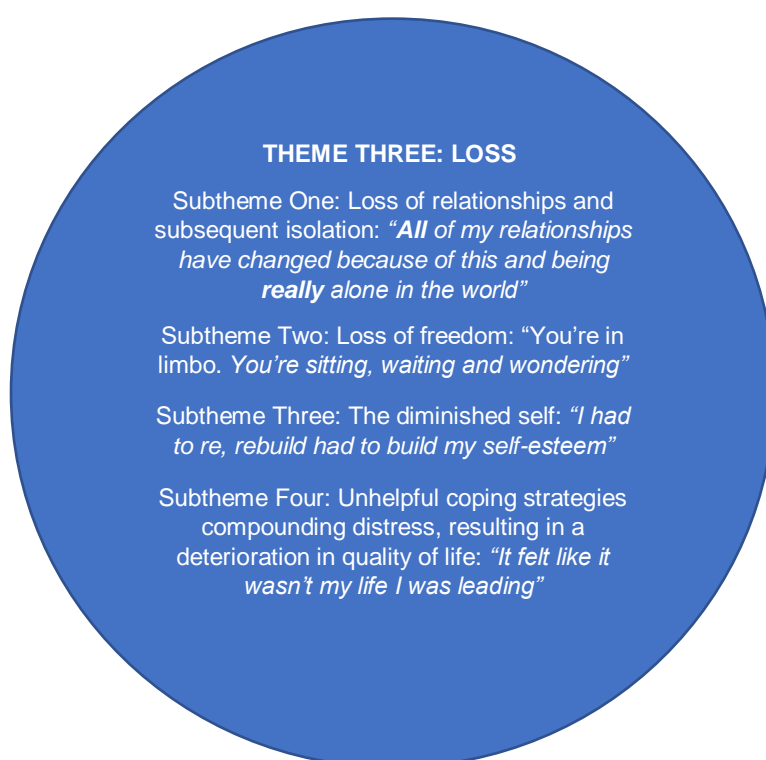


Figure 4. Diagram of theme three and subthemes

This theme aimed to capture the manifold and varied losses that participants incurred and how they made sense of them. Coping strategies employed by participants appeared to compound their distress leading to a deterioration in quality of life. Difficulties were encountered including all of the subthemes within

figure 4 above, which seemed to aptly highlight the scale of the losses incurred and their spilling over into the many areas of participants' lives.

4.4.1 Subtheme One: Loss of Relationships and Subsequent Isolation: “*All of my relationships have changed because of this and being really alone in the world*”

All participants with the exception of Kirsty reported the demise of relationships and subsequent isolation. Barbara described the breakdown of familial relationships:

Extract 39

Barbara: *the family is completely broken up, because of one person has broken up a whole family, you know, and it's, it's hellish. I've lost a sister, I've lost a niece, I've lost a nephew, I've lost a great nephew, who I've never met, you know, so and my mum's lost a great grandson, who she's never met, because nobody will speak to each other because of all of this. This woman has destroyed my life and, erm, she's destroyed my family's life* (310-315)

Here, Barbara repeats 'lost' five times and this is perhaps indicative of the amount of loss she feels she has incurred. Barbara refers to her 'whole family' having 'broken up' before naming the breakdown of her relationship with her sister, niece, nephew and great nephew. This seems to suggest that the loss is two-fold; losing a relationship with them collectively as a family unit and also individually. She refers to losing a member of the family she's 'never met' and this seems to imply the denying of an experience i.e. being a great aunt. Barbara reported that this 'this woman has destroyed my life' and this indicates the degree to which she feels her world has been annihilated and also perhaps suggests the intentional nature of the perpetrator's actions in destroying her life. Her description of the family being 'completely broken up' and repetition of 'broken up' seems to emphasise the damage incurred, leaving her in a place she likens

to hell, 'hellish'. This choice of word seems poignant and highlights Barbara's suffering.

When I asked Barbara how she coped with becoming estranged from her family she replied:

Extract 40

Barbara: *[pause] [strokes her cat] That's my cat, I've got a cat sitting next to me, sorry! [laughs] I've got one friend in...(967-972)*

Here Barbara's face fell and she leant over to stroke her cat. I got the impression that if she hadn't have laughed, she would have broken down. It felt as if this was a very painful topic for her and in contrast to her family who seemed so far away, only her cat was within reaching distance to offer comfort. When I probed further, she reported having 'one friend' living in a different town and her solitude felt tangible. I wondered if her apology reflected her sorrow and regret at losing her family.

Elaine also described the profound loss of significant relationships in her life:

Extract 41

Elaine: *I have a couple of other friends who [pause] [deep inhalation and exhalation] erm abandoned me in not such a nice way... she said "not everything in" (in a goofy voice impersonating her friend) like she just didn't understand it, didn't get it, didn't care, didn't want it, like 'you're in trouble, goodbye' (646-661)*

Extract 42

Elaine: *nobody wants to have anything to do with you anymore cos they either don't get it and they think you're nuts or they do get it and they don't want to be targeted themselves (1413-1416)*

Here Elaine explicitly talks about feeling 'abandoned' owing to the loss of her friendships. She pauses as she seems to struggle to articulate this painful part of her experience, her deep inhalation and exhalation seeming to suggest a desire to manage her emotions. The mimicking portrays her friend as stupid and perhaps implies an underlying anger with her because she 'didn't understand it,

didn't get it, didn't care, didn't want it'. She explains the paradox of friends who 'get it' and 'don't want to be targeted' and those who 'don't get it' and 'think you're nuts'. The loss appears to sweep across all of her relationships, seeming to leave her with 'nobody'.

When asked if her experience had changed her in any way, Elaine replied:

Extract 43

Elaine: *the messages I was getting is "die Jew" and 'the Holocaust never happened' ...why am I getting like flooded with these [pause] like anti-Semitic [laughs] messages so the Holocaust never happened that's very interesting because erm [pause] not that I'm my ordeal is on that level at all but erm the the experience of having everything in your world change and having **all** of your relationships all of my relationships have changed because of this and being **really** alone in the world being you know going back to the house that erm [pause] like isn't yours anymore so to speak (1153-1165)*

Her reference to the Holocaust seems poignant and while she says that her 'ordeal' is not 'on that level', there is the suggestion that there are some parallels she draws. She seems to be comparing the vast demise of relationships within her own life with Genocide. The magnitude of her loss is highlighted in her description of 'everything' in her world changing and repetition of 'all of your/my relationships' with an emphasis placed on 'all'. Her emphasis on 'really' highlights how solitary she feels and her reference to 'that house' not being hers anymore perhaps infers that she feels somewhat destitute and abandoned 'in the world'. Her tone of voice in extract 43, where she sounds so sad, indicates how distressing this aspect of her experience has been.

Here Steve talks about the breakdown of his relationship with his employer and colleagues:

Extract 44

Steve: *I had no empathy from my employers, I had no empathy from people I worked with erm and I thought all of these people over all of these years I've been working away I've been doing my best to do a good job*

and all of a sudden it's over and it counted for absolutely nothing (959-963)

Extract 45

Steve: it it it it just had totally destroyed our lives erm we lost our home ver it there was the loss of a job and we're now renting the place that we bought erm we're we're you know living day by day now (111-113)

Steve's description of 'all of these people' and repetition of 'no empathy' seems to emphasise the amount of people he feels haven't empathised with him. His description of 'all of sudden' perhaps implies the speed with which he feels the loss occurred and he sounds angry when he reflects on it counting for 'absolutely nothing'. The overall sense of loss that Steve experienced is highlighted in extract 45 and he uses similar words to Barbara (extract 39), summarising his experience as having 'totally destroyed our lives'. His repetition of 'it' seems to suggest a difficulty in articulating the level of destruction inflicted while his description of 'totally' underscores the entirety of damage incurred. Steve's description of 'living day by day' also suggests the loss of a sense of stability and perhaps certainty about the future.

In contrast to Steve, Elaine and Barbara, Rafiq reported a more temporary suspension of relationships:

Extract 46

Rafiq: the fact that someone had gone like so deep into your life er and erm tried to stabe, destabilise like you, your relationships with people. That's what I found traumatic. And erm, and for a while like that, that, those foundations were like wobbling in my life, you know. And erm [pause] er [pause] I mean I reclaimed all the friend, like your friends are your friends And er nobody I got, you know, my friends came back, even if I didn't tell 'em at the time, but everything went back to normal with them (1660-1670)

Here Rafiq explains that he found the perpetrator's attempts to destabilise his 'relationships with people' to be 'traumatic'. For foundations to be 'wobbling' in the traditional sense, considerable depth of excavation has usually occurred and this perhaps implies how 'deep into your life' the perpetrator had gone. His

description of having ‘reclaimed’ his friends and that they ‘came back’ infers that those relationships were lost for a period of time before they were re-established. His assertion that ‘everything went back to normal’ implies that the time period of them being unclaimed was abnormal and temporary for him.

4.4.2 Subtheme Two: Loss of freedom: “*You’re in limbo. You’re sitting, waiting and wondering*”

All participants reported or sounded stuck, imprisoned, in limbo or paralysed.

Below Rafiq describes feeling imprisoned:

Extract 47

Rafiq: *they* (his managers) *didn’t like that I talked up about this amongst active, w, I dunno, whatever resentment they had for me in speaking up about it, but you know, like in any [pause] form of abuse, they want the victim to stay quiet, right?...there was this element that I should, I should keep quiet and I shouldn’t and actually that was exactly what was imprisoning me, erm, ‘cause when I didn’t tell my friends, I didn’t tell anyone, I didn’t tell the police* (1470-1482)

Extract 48

Rafiq: *so I felt a bit trapped by the fact that I didn’t tell anyone. And so, I was kind of internalising it* (942-945)

Here Rafiq reports that his managers ‘didn’t like’ that he ‘talked up’ and implies that ‘they’ wanted him to ‘stay quiet’. He describes himself as a ‘victim’ seeming to emphasise how mistreated he felt by his managers. His repetition of ‘should’ perhaps highlights how obliged he felt to keep quiet while his repetition of ‘didn’t tell’ perhaps emphasises the extent to which he didn’t speak up. His description of feeling imprisoned suggests that he felt trapped, perhaps in his own solitude. I wondered if there could have been anything else contributing to him keeping quiet, a sense of shame perhaps? Rafiq’s description of ‘internalising it’ perhaps implies internal damage, wounding him from within and is perhaps symbolic of the depth of distress he experienced.

While Rafiq described feeling trapped, Barbara reported feeling 'in limbo':

Extract 49

Barbara: *The most difficult bit I think for me was not knowing. Was not knowing whether I was going to go to court, not knowing whether I could I suppose whether I could have a life because for two years you're in limbo. You're sitting, waiting and wondering whether they're going to come up and say well, "We're going to take you to court." And in a lot of ways I wish they had', but now I again I'm sitting waiting and wondering if this happens again, if she accuses me again, are they going to come again? Is the same thing going to happen? It's happened three times. And is the same thing going to be where we don't have sufficient evidence to take it to court? So, every single time I'm told at the end of this, if there was if she came back with more evidence, or sufficient evidence to prove something, this could all be re-opened! you know. So, although there was no evidence at the time, that's not to say that years down the line something might not happen again. That's the worst thing, being in limbo and not having closure (867-880)*

Here Barbara's repetition of being 'in limbo' and 'sitting, waiting and wondering' is perhaps suggestive of how stuck she feels and unable to move forward with her life. Her life sounds temporarily suspended as she asks herself multiple questions about the future relating to the perpetrator accusing *her* of being the perpetrator and being charged. She sounds stuck in the 'not knowing' of what is going to happen next and if 'the same thing' will happen again. Her narrative here is repetitive and circular and perhaps mirrors the circular nature of her thoughts, going over and over the same worries. She mentioned earlier (692) about a desire to get her life 'back on track' and here I couldn't help but reflect on the metaphor of a derailed train; wheels rotating but remaining stationary and stuck. Later she said:

Extract 50

Barbara: *I hate the fact that she could do this again! And there's nothing I can do about it...You want closure, you want to close down and that's it, over. I haven't got that yet, and I don't know if I ever will. So, she's swanning about all over the country, allowed to go to America and everything I have this on my record, because I was charged (898-904)*

Here the perpetrator is portrayed as 'swanning about', which implies feeling free and liberated, metaphorically gliding effortlessly across an open lake. By contrast, Barbara sounds laden down with ruminations and burdened with a criminal record. Barbara's repetition of 'you want' perhaps indicates how much she wants 'closure' and she sounds angry that she cannot achieve this. Her feelings of powerlessness to changing the situation are apparent when she says 'there's nothing I can do about it'.

Similarly, Kirsty reflects on being unable to gain closure and sounds trapped in her ruminations:

Extract 51

Kirsty: *I think obviously it has ended but I don't know if I don't know if that's it and as well there's a lot of things left like [pause] unfinished like why did he do it? In a way I'd **love** to know why he did it but I've not been given an explanation [pause] so I don't know [cries]* (1333-1340)

Extract 52

Kirsty: *but I've not been given an explanation as to **why he did it** so there's no sort of ending to it because there's no [sighs] answer as to why he's acted the way he's acted, he doesn't have to answer to anybody he's just been told to leave me alone by somebody with more power so **that** seems to have worked for now and that's just it I there's no like closure to it* (1390-1395)

Here, Kirsty sounds stuck in ruminations relating to the perpetrator's motive. She repeats 'not been (been) given an explanation' and 'I don't know' which seems to emphasise her not knowing his motive or if it has ended and perhaps how important it is for her to identify his motive in order for her to achieve closure. Her conflicted feelings over whether it has ended are apparent when she says, 'obviously it has ended' and later 'I don't know if that's it' and 'there's no sort of ending'. Her assertion that he appears to have stopped 'for now' highlights her perception of the temporality of him having stopped and she returns to her circular ruminative struggle of there 'being no closure'. In a similar vein to Barbara, her

ruminative thinking appears to contribute to her feeling stuck and prevents her from moving forward.

4.4.3 Subtheme Three: The diminished self: “*I kind of had to re, rebuild, had to build my self-esteem*”

All participants reported a deterioration of their mental health and damage or concerns over damage to their reputation. In terms of the former, depression, hypervigilance, agoraphobia, loss of self-esteem and paranoia were cited. The following brief extracts provide a snapshot:

Extract 53

Barbara: *it was very difficult, it affected me quite badly, I was put on antidepressants* (491-492)

Extract 54

Steve: *it's extremely distressing I was under the doctor for about eight years erm reactive depression erm and hypervigilance* (721-722)

Extract 55

Elaine: *I actually became kind of agoraphobic* (883)

Extract 56

Steve: *I lost four stone in weight and and the whole thing made me feel...that I was a sub species of the human race* (205-207)

Extract 57

Kirsty: *I just became quite paranoid about things about being watched and I'd always keep the curtains shut cos I didn't know if he would just drive past* (1021-1023)

When asked if her experience had changed her in any way, Elaine replied:

Extract 58

Elaine: *it's changed me profoundly...I'm I'm err much more erm err [pause] solitary I would say yeh... [sigh][pause] [tut] erm, well behaviourally I mean I I don't erm like I said I it's very it's been very pervasive and it's erm [sighs] ah [pause] [tut] erm there's a spark that I you know a kind of innocence that I erm [pause] don't have I don't know erm more erm a little yeh just not the not the not the same out not the same outlook I mean it's just it's just it's been devastating* (1137-1151)

Although Elaine states that she's changed 'profoundly' the hesitations and pauses seem to suggest she's having difficulty explicating *how* she's changed. She speaks quietly which perhaps infers that she's having difficulty acknowledging to herself or maybe sharing with me that she's become 'much more solitary'. She seems reflective here, as if this is the first time she's considered this question, the 'tuts' perhaps revealing a frustration at being unable to name how she's changed. Her repetition four times of 'not the' in reference to 'same outlook' perhaps indicates how much she feels her outlook has changed. Steve commented on how he feels he has fundamentally changed as a person:

Extract 59

Steve: *I was a happy go lucky cheerful to everybody would help anybody hence I worked in I was a general nurse and worked in in care homes um and erm I had a very light-hearted attitude towards life always laughing and joking around and now I find myself to be a serious person who finds it hard to laugh at anything* (546-550)

Earlier Steve reported being on antidepressants and here he describes a distinct shift in his mental state from one of 'happy go lucky', 'cheerful', 'light hearted(ness)' and 'always joking around' to finding it 'hard to laugh at anything'. He speaks with greater passion and spends more time and words depicting his former positive mental state, seeming to portray a current depleted self.

For Rafiq, it seems his diminished sense of self is more temporary than that of Steve or Elaine. Rafiq said:

Extract 60

Rafiq: *I kind of had to re, rebuild, had to build my self-esteem, my wor, my professional self-esteem back from zero* (1402-1403)

Explicating that he had to 'rebuild' his self-esteem 'back from zero' implies that it was demolished in its entirety and that nothing remained. His description of 're', 'rebuild' and 'build' perhaps implies the amount of rebuilding that he felt needed to be done and his repetition of 'had to' possibly emphasises how obligated he

felt to making this happen. He eludes to his self-esteem consisting of separate parts; his 'professional' and non-professional self-esteem, with the former needing to rebuilt, perhaps implying that the latter remained intact.

All participants reported that damage or concern over damage to their reputation was an important aspect of their experience. Some participants were accused of sexual impropriety by the perpetrator or proxy or reported being impersonated by the perpetrator online and offline who portrayed them to be sexually inappropriate.

When asked what the worst part about being cyberstalked was, Elaine replied:

Extract 61

Elaine: *the loss of my credibility that's the **only** thing I don't that's the only thing that I have a real problem with...it's just absolutely that is absolutely absolutely devastating it's irreparable* (796-808)

Elaine's repetition of 'that's the only thing' and the emphasis she places on 'only' highlights the centrality of the loss of her credibility to her distress. She speaks quietly and sounds upset as she seems to reflect on how 'devastating' it's been. Her Repetition of it being 'absolutely' devastating to the point that it's 'irreparable' underscores the impact of the loss of her credibility and her belief that it cannot be re-established.

4.4.4 Subtheme Four: Unhelpful coping strategies compounding distress, resulting in a diminished quality of life: *"It felt like it wasn't my life I was leading"*

Participants recounted various ways in which they coped with their experience of being cyberstalked. Far from providing comfort, such strategies appeared to compound their distress and lead to a diminished quality of life. Barbara explained:

Extract 62

Barbara: *It felt like it wasn't my life I was leading. I was leading a life that revolved around going online, checking my name, making sure that there was nothing set up in my name. You know, it was a constant worry about what was on the internet. Anything else, your bills, your housework, anything else like that, didn't come close to what I had to do every time I, I opened the computer. I had to google my name, I had to check Myspace, I had to check Blogger, I had to check everything to see that there was no more stuff on. And that was what my life revolved around for two years was just trying to make sure that there was nothing there that was in my name. Or there was nothing there that had my name on it. You know, and it was constant, all I did was check all the time, I was so worried about anything else happening, that the concentration that I should have been putting on other things you know, erm, like with my dad moved into a nursing home before he died, with housework needing doing, with you know, everyday things, I didn't care. It was all to do with making sure that nobody else was going to hurt us, and I'm talking about my family as well. So, it was just a constant case of googling everybody's name, checking their Facebook, checking their Twitter, making sure she hadn't got into anything, and that was like [sigh] I suppose it was like OCD in a way, it was just constant (773-790)*

Barbara describes here the extent to which she checked websites and this is perhaps highlighted in her repetition of 'constant' and 'check' seven times in this extract. Her repetition of 'had to' seems to emphasise how obligated she felt to undertake these checks. She says 'it wasn't my life I was leading' which suggests that she stopped living for a period of time and was in some way existing in a different state. She describes her life 'revolving' around checking and she sounds locked into a cycle of checking whereby her usual daily activities are neglected. The circular way in which she repeats herself here perhaps symbolises the circular nature of her checking online, over and over again. In subtheme two she talked about feeling 'in limbo' and it seems that her constant checking was feeding into and exacerbating those feelings of being stuck. She likens her continual checking to OCD inferring the Disordered extent of her Obsessive and Compulsive checking, her sigh seeming to indicate the emotional burden that this involved.

When asked what impact the cyberstalking had on her, Kirsty replied:

Extract 63

Kirsty: *[sigh] I don't know cos I tend cos I bottle things up I think this is the first time I've spoken about the whole thing really other than telling the police the facts cos I bottle everything up I don't want to deal with it I don't deal with it' (954-956)*

Kirsty's initial reaction of sighing seems to suggest a desire to expel emotions attached to this question and perhaps reject the question. Her response of 'I don't know' perhaps highlights how little time she has spent reflecting on her experiences and a subsequent lack of insight into how it has impacted on her. She repeats 'bottle things/everything up' and this perhaps emphasises her preference for suppressing her thoughts and not engaging with the upset created by her experience. Her comment of not wanting 'to deal with it' perhaps suggests that it is too painful for her to 'deal' with, hence her preference for disengaging. When I asked *'What was it like when you started talking about it...?'* Kirsty replied:

Extract: 64

Kirsty: *Uh [cries] sorry, I can't control it [laughs] sorry it was just a bit like erm I just couldn't stop like I just told the police and it just all came out I just I just remember not being able to breathe for ages and ages cos [cries] it was just [cries] like a bit of a release to just say everything that he'd done to have it all in the space of like 5 minutes it was like I can't believe this has gone on over such a **long** time sorry I'm upset again [pause] it was weird it was just like erm I mean it had gone on so long but I'd never actually said everything that he'd done the way he about the way he'd acted so it just I just it totally floored me and I I remember being super panicky and not being able to breathe properly, I was on the phone to him and I remember just being so upset I think it just all hit me and then as soon as I reported and I was like fine done (1177-1194)*

Kirsty's initial reaction of crying indicates her upset while her laughter seems to signify attempts to defend against the pain. The abundance of false starts, where the words seem to get stuck in her throat perhaps highlights her propensity to keep her experience locked within herself and a resultant difficulty letting the words come out. Her description of not being able to 'control' or 'stop' it and 'it just all came out' perhaps implies the unorganised outpouring of her pain, after

having kept it 'bottled up' for so long. Kirsty says 'it totally floored me' and reports 'not being able to breathe properly' and perhaps this implies that the distress involved in engaging with the pain knocked her off her feet, leaving her breathless. This appears to be the first time she has engaged with her experience and she expresses disbelief at it having 'gone on over such a long time'. The discomfort involved in engaging with the pain seems apparent when she metaphorically puts the cork back in the bottle, stating 'I was like fine done'. She seems to have moved back to the safety and familiarity of suppressing her thoughts and disengaging from her distress.

Common to all participants' accounts were reports of them shutting themselves away. Steve explained:

Extract 65

Steve: we shut it off- the internet entirely and produced a lot of CDs of my own digital music erm which I found soothing to my soul if you like erm and er it helped me shut off for hours on end erm the fact that there was erm a society a country and a world outside my front door... the phone came out exactly and erm you know there was no contact...it's the only way you can cope with it (706-715)

Steve and his partner sound isolated here as he describes them removing the phone line and internet access and staying at home. His repetition of 'shut (it) off' and description of 'entirely' seems to highlight the extent of their self-imposed ostracism from 'society', the 'country' and 'the world'. Steve's portrayal implies a desire to hide away from the world. The absence of alternative ways for him to cope is apparent when he says 'it's the only way you can cope', his tone of voice suggesting conviction in his belief.

Similarly, Barbara explains how she hid herself online:

Extract 66

Barbara: everything's ultra-secure now so nobody can see me. And my photo isn't on any of my sites, my cat's on, or something else random from the zoo's on. But I actually don't have my details, I've even changed my name on my Gmail account...I had to hide all my blogs, and I'm gonna

have to go in and change my name on everything, because I'm terrified in case she finds me (474-479)

Barbara seems to associate hiding herself with feeling safe and this is apparent in her description of 'everything's ultra-secure now so nobody can see me'. She seems to imply that she's erased her identity and sense of self online when she says 'I actually don't have my details, I've even changed my name'. It seems she would rather be unfindable to others and absent online, choosing to hide behind 'something else random from the zoo' than a meaningful picture. Barbara describes being 'terrified in case she finds me' and this seems to highlight how fearful she is of the perpetrator and reveals her motivation to disappear online. There's a feeling of her been driven underground and trying to forge a new identity in order to survive a pursuant Other.

Overall participants experienced considerable loss stretching across many different areas of their life. Mental health, break-down of relationships, freedom, jobs, home, financial stability and damage to their reputation were all reported. For some, these weren't experienced as lost but 'destroyed' by the perpetrator, emphasising the intentional, destructive and brutal nature of the loss incurred. Coping strategies such as excessive checking, ruminating, hiding, and suppressing thoughts further compounded their loss leading to a diminished quality of life.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the findings presented in chapter four in relation to the research questions and the literature presented in chapter two. Implications for practise are also presented including a discussion on reflexivity. The chapter concludes with a review of the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

5.2 Summary of Findings

This study aimed to address the dearth of research focussing on cyberstalking. Five semi-structured interviews were held with people who had been cyberstalked addressing the following research questions:

- How is cyberstalking experienced?
- How do people make sense of their experience of being cyberstalked?
- How do people cope with being cyberstalked?
- What are the clinical implications for Counselling Psychology in addressing these questions?

5.2.1 Making Sense of the Perpetrator

Trying to make sense of the perpetrator's character and their behaviour represented a key part of participants' narratives, with the exception of Steve who believed he was targeted due to homophobia. Perpetrators were depicted as a pathologised Other, who behaved abnormally and terms such as 'weird', 'crazy'

'odd' 'nuts', 'quirky', 'bizarre' 'creepy' 'and 'mental' were employed in abundance throughout their narratives. All four participants explicitly made reference to a mental health diagnosis with Kirsty believing her perpetrator to have schizophrenia and Rafiq wondering if his perpetrator had borderline personality disorder. Interestingly, Barbara and Elaine who reported that their perpetrators had been sectioned under the Mental Health Act (1983) or diagnosed with bipolar disorder respectively, questioned if their perpetrator's mental health diagnoses were genuine, wondering if this was part of the perpetrator's plan to manipulate them or others. Nevertheless, Barbara and Elaine still portrayed their perpetrators as being mentally unstable, providing numerous examples of 'crazy' behaviour or things they had said such as 'eating mice' or wanting to 'switch places'.

The focus of this study remained on the experience of those who had been cyberstalked and as such the mental health status of the perpetrators is unknown. Therefore, we do not know if the perpetrators had a mental health diagnosis or what was going through their minds when they were stalking the participants. However, what is clear is that all participants avidly and emphatically *felt* that their perpetrators had mental health problems and that they behaved in a way that was inappropriate and unacceptable to them. In reflecting upon this finding, it is perhaps relevant to consider that stalking was constructed as a crime carried out by a psychopathic stranger (Spitzberg & Cadiz, 2002) and that this may have influenced the way in which participants made sense of their experience.

Participants perceived perpetrators to be dichotomised from themselves largely in terms of mental health and positioned themselves as the 'normal' party who conducted themselves appropriately. They sounded angry and frustrated with their perpetrators' lack of compliance with social convention and incredulous at

their persistence in behaving in ways they deemed to be unacceptable. Dichotomies within the perpetrator's character were also prevalent within accounts with messages seeming to convey 'love' on the one hand and 'hate' on the other, creating confusion.

Cupach and Spitzberg (2004) offer an insightful theory based on stalkers who pursued former intimate partners that may facilitate an understanding of such apparently conflicting behaviour. They posit that when the stalker realises that the goal of reconciliation with their former partner is unobtainable, they exact revenge upon the victim in order to soothe the wounds of humiliation. The motive shifts from reconciliation to revenge and this may be gradual or sudden with messages of vengefulness intertwined with messages of romance. This confusion of messages for the victim is a representation of the manifestation of the perpetrator's own struggle with competing motives of rage and romance. In the current study, only one participant was pursued by a former partner, Elaine. However, Cupach and Spitzberg's (2004) theory may have relevance to dyads beyond the relational parameters of former intimate partners, such as those who have not been engaged in a romantic relationship but who are seeking relational fusion with the object of pursuit. Both Rafiq and Kirsty reported that their stalker wished to initiate a relationship and both received dichotomised messages of love and hate. This suggests that Cupach and Spitzberg's (2004) theory has wider application than that of ex-intimate stalkers and helps shed some light on the confusion experienced by participants in the current study.

The many unanswered questions were apparent throughout narratives with participants identifying various unknown aspects of their experience and expressing a need to have their questions answered. The gaps in their knowledge seem to differ among participants with Kirsty for example being unable to pin

down the perpetrator's motive, Elaine being unable to ascertain the identities of the proxies involved and how they're linked and Barbara not knowing what the perpetrator had done to her online and what she was going to do to her next. The 'not knowing' was identified by some participants as a key aspect of their experience and their inability to gain insight seemed to contribute to their sense of powerlessness.

5.2.2 Powerlessness

Feelings of powerlessness were captured in superordinate theme two and this theme seemed to run through the core of participant narratives. Participants were not asked if they had been victimised or discriminated against in the past or if they felt marginalised by society. However, woven through all accounts, with the exception of Kirsty, were descriptions of feeling marginalised due to faith or ethnicity, discriminated against due to sexuality or feeling victimised. These experiences felt important to capture as they seemed to represent an important facet contributing to the way in which participants constructed and made sense of their current experience of being targeted.

A study by Reyns et al. (2012) found that minority groups in terms of ethnicity and sexuality were disproportionally represented as being cyberstalked. The findings from the current study may also suggest that marginalised groups may be more at risk of being targeted.

Barbara was not part of a minority group in terms of her faith, ethnicity or sexuality. However, she sounded the most victimised of all, saturating the interview with reports of what others including the police, her current stalker and her previous stalker had 'done' to her. This finding suggests that in addition to

marginalised groups such as those described above, people who have been victimised in the past may also represent a vulnerable group, susceptible to being targeted.

Also, apparent within accounts was the ferocity of the perpetrator's invasiveness and the fear and sense of helplessness that this evoked. Participants painted a picture of being in battle or fighting a deadly virus to explicate their experience of being intruded upon by a more powerful, unstoppable Other. Barbara's account highlighted the extent of the intrusions that included proxies manipulated by the stalker into travelling from Mumbai and demanding access into her home.

This finding is in line with Dressing et al. (2014) who found that cyberstalking victims reported feelings of helplessness and Maple et al. (2011) who found that cyberstalking victims reported feeling fearful and distressed. This finding is also in line with Short et al. (2014) who reported that those targeted by cyberstalkers expressed helplessness and lowered perceptions of control. Given that a central component contained within the definition of cyberstalking involves the elicitation of fear in the recipient (Maple et al., 2011), it is perhaps unsurprising that participants reported feeling fearful and helpless. Nevertheless, the current study has captured the extent of the participants' fear, aspects that created such fear, and *what it was like for them* to experience such fear; elements that are perhaps absent from quantitative studies such as those of Maple et al. (2011) and Dressing et al. (2014).

5.2.3 Empowering Parties Exacerbating Distress

All participants except Kirsty reported a distinct dissatisfaction with support from third parties such as advocacy schemes, the police, anti-stalking organisations

and employers who exacerbated their position of powerlessness and compounded their distress. Not being heard, believed or validated or mistaken as the perpetrator seemed to represent an important facet of their experience contributing to their disempowerment. Anger and frustration ran through their accounts and participants seemed to be as angry with such organisations for not providing adequate support as they were with their perpetrators. Four out of five participants reported being stalked by proxy and sounded outnumbered and overwhelmed by individuals intruding on them. There was a sense of the victim as a lone soldier fighting against an army of more powerful others.

Elaine expressed rage and frustration towards 'experts' for not recognising that her experience existed beyond the parameters of their typologies of stalkers and for being unfamiliar with the concept of stalking by proxy. She seemed to respond to the absence of a knowledgeable expert by *becoming* the expert, reading up on the topic and visiting conferences. She told me how she planned on writing an article for a feminist magazine in the coming months to inform others about stalking and I got the impression that she felt she was the only person who truly understood what it was like to feel stalked. At times during the interview, I felt she was lecturing me, trying to educate me about what she felt I ought to know. I was left feeling angry and wondered if this was how she felt after speaking with advocates and professionals and being 'told' how stalking occurs; patronised and undermined.

In contrast to the powerlessness that Elaine reported, she employed the use of powerful metaphors and analogies throughout her narrative, describing her experience as being comparable to rape (1423), the loss of relationships as akin to Genocide (reflected on in section 4.4.1 extract 43) and feeling fearful of the perpetrator killing her mother and burying her (1505-1506). I wondered if such

striking metaphors were designed to grab my attention and ensure that I understood the gravity of her experience and listened in a way that perhaps she felt others hadn't. Indeed, I listened intently as she painted a picture of her vulnerability and powerlessness. However, when transcribing the interview and reflecting on her account of events, I found myself wondering if she was embellishing or exaggerating her story, moving away from the central ground between hermeneutics of suspicion and hermeneutics of empathy (Smith et al., 2009) and towards the former. Did she really feel that her experience of being cyberstalked was comparable to rape or that the perpetrator would bury her if she filed for divorce? I put off transcribing her interview and engaging with the data for some time, and wondered if this perhaps mirrored the absence of an available Other to listen to and engage with her experience. This is discussed further in section 5.5 and in my reflective diary (appendix J).

Rafiq also tried to access support from anti-stalking organisations but found that much of the assistance was geared towards women who had been targeted by men. He said *"I think definitely there needs to be stuff for men...also with the, the stuff for women it assumes there's maybe violence involved, and maybe there is up to a point women towards men, but that wasn't actually my chief concern"* (2664-2669). This perhaps suggests that the prevalent paradigm of offline stalking being a gendered crime, perpetrated by men against women has shaped the provision of resources for victims of cyberstalking. Consequently, men such as Rafiq whose experience exists beyond this paradigm, are not being catered for and remain bereft of support.

The findings from the current study corroborate those of Maple et al. (2011) who found that participants were frustrated with the lack of help from service providers and the police in terms of support to cope with the effects and stopping the

stalking behaviour. The findings from the current study also corroborate the findings of Short et al. (2014) who found that participants experienced a lack of support from the police. This highlights the role of Counselling Psychology in providing clinical interventions to support those affected.

5.2.4 Desperation and Suicidal Thoughts

What was striking throughout participants' narratives was the detrimental impact of this feeling of powerlessness on their wellbeing and how it led to suicide ideation. This illuminates the magnitude of their distress and their desperation to end the torment. Indeed, an inability to gain closure was a thread that seemed to run through all accounts. Even after the police intervened and the perpetrator hadn't contacted them for many months, many participants felt it was only a matter of time before the perpetrator would begin pursuing them again.

The central finding of powerlessness in the current study is in line with Johansen and Thomsen's (2016) study which found that participants of stalking (online and offline) experience powerlessness. However, while Johansen and Thomsen (2016) found that it was the unpredictability of future stalking behaviour that created the sense of powerlessness, the current study found that the experience of being powerlessness was multifaceted, with many factors contributing to the experience of feeling disempowered. Being unable to stop the invasive perpetrator, feeling unsupported by third parties, not being believed and being unable to achieve closure were all highlighted as factors contributing to participants' powerlessness. The stalker's unpredictability was a factor and some participants made reference to 'not knowing' what the stalker would do next but this wasn't the only factor. Johansen and Thomsen (2016) also reported that

their participants felt powerless due to feeling 'constantly surveyed' (p.887) and this was not found in the present study.

The findings from the current study also substantiate those of Short et al. (2014) who identified key themes including 'control and intimidation' (online and offline) and the 'determined offender' which illuminated the intrusive, pervasive and relentless nature of the cyberstalker's behaviour.

5.2.5 Loss

Many participants explicitly described the cumulative effects of the losses as having 'destroyed' their lives' or painted a picture of their lives having being destroyed, highlighting the brutal and devastating effects of the perpetrators' actions. The breakdown of relationships with friends, family, employers and colleagues was reported in all except one of the participants' accounts. A key factor contributing to the breakdown of such relationships seem to be not being believed or empathised with. The extent of loss was highlighted by Elaine who seemed to draw parallels between the demise of her relationships and mass Genocide, perhaps signifying how large scale the loss felt to her and the unjust and brutal manner in which she experienced the breakdown of her relationships.

Anger was prevalent throughout accounts when they spoke of the loss incurred, either towards the perpetrator for instigating the loss or the parties who became lost, for not understanding their experience or disbelieving that they were the innocent party. Elaine described the paradox of friends who didn't understand her situation and weren't there to support her and friends who did understand but whom didn't want to maintain a friendship out of fear that they too would be targeted.

The demise of relationships appeared to sweep across their lives seeming to leave participants feeling isolated, abandoned and destitute. They expressed regret, sorrow, pain and perhaps grief for the relationships lost. For some, such relational losses lead to further losses including that of employment, income, home, financial security and a sense of stability about the future. Indeed, the losses seemed to seep into all areas of their lives, reflecting the pervasive, intrusive nature of being cyberstalked.

Sheridan and Grant (2007) and Short et al. (2014) found that victims of cyberstalking experienced damage to or a breakdown of familial relationships and the current study provides further evidence of this. This study also highlights that the loss of relationships spans beyond familial relationships and relates to many other relationships too.

The key finding of loss and subsequent isolation in the current study is also in line with Maple et al. (2011) and Johansen and Thomsen (2016) who propose that victims become socially isolated. However, Johansen and Thomsen (2016) suggest that victims withdraw from social activities and relocate in an attempt to re-establish a sense of power and control in their lives and it is this that leads to social isolation. However, in the current study, participants became socially isolated due to family, friends, colleagues and employers not believing them and providing them with support and in this sense (and with the exception of Rafiq) it was the decisions of those parties that lead to their isolation rather than the participants' choices to withdraw.

Participants described feeling 'trapped', 'imprisoned', being 'in limbo' and 'sitting, wondering and waiting' and various factors seem to have contributed to their respective losses of freedom. Barbara's paralysis seemed to have been derived

from not knowing whether she was going to be arrested and taken to court, whereas for Kirsty, the absence of an explanation for the perpetrator having targeted her seemed to have left her feeling stuck and unable to move forward. Both women sound trapped in a cycle of ruminative thinking going over and over the perpetrator's possible motive or worries about being taken to court. Even after the perpetrator had ceased targeting them for over twelve months in Kirsty's case and two years in Barbara's case, they reported still feeling unable to move on because they felt the cessation was temporary.

Rafiq described feeling silenced by his managers and feeling fearful of telling his friends and family in case they blamed him for being targeted. He described feeling imprisoned in his own isolation. He was the only participant to gain closure following intervention from his HR department and the perpetrator's visa expiring and said *"it just gave it just m, me and my wife erm er, a kind of, like a kind of err allowed us to say goodbye to something that was quite traumatic, erm, as well You know it's it's in the past...it felt like I took back my lifeyou, you've destroyed your life, my life as much as you tried at that time. And now like you're out of my life forever, and erm and I'm getting on with my life"* (1212-1230).

5.2.6 The Diminished Self

Apparent within all participants' accounts was a deterioration in mental health. Depression, agoraphobia, loss of self-esteem and paranoia were all reported. Some participants also described their outlook on life having changed or changes in their character. Depression appeared to be the most prevalent mental health deterioration with all participants except Kirsty reporting either being on antidepressants or describing symptoms pertaining to depression. This finding

substantiates a study by Dressing et al. (2014) which found that 34.6% of victims of cyberstalking reported feeling depressed and research by Short et al. (2014) which revealed that participants experienced paranoia.

All participants reported that loss of their credibility or damage or concern over damage to their reputation was an important facet of their experience. An unexpected finding was that three of the participants reported that the perpetrator made slanderous accusations of sexual impropriety about them. Brief details of this are contained within the participant information table (appendix B).

These findings corroborate previous research which found that participants experienced damage to their reputation (Short et al., 2014) or reported feeling most fearful of damage to their reputation (Maple et al., 2011). However, the current study reveals the nature of the damage to reputation with accusations of sexual impropriety representing a key theme in participants' narratives. This is a novel finding which doesn't seem to have been located within previous research.

5.2.7 Coping Strategies

Prevalent throughout participants' accounts were the varied ways in which they tried to cope with their experiences. Far from alleviating distress, such strategies appeared to compound their suffering. Barbara described how her life revolved around excessive checking online and that consequentially she neglected other areas of her life. Such checking seemed to take over her world, which only served to compound her sense of paralysis and 'life in limbo'. However, despite having overcome her obsessive checking, Barbara still sounds trapped in a pattern of ruminative thinking about being charged and taken to court despite her perpetrator not having made contact for two years. She describes 'sitting, waiting

and wondering', taunted by ruminations and questions relating to the perpetrator's future actions and worries about being charged and this prevents her from moving forward. In this sense, it is Barbara's ruminative thinking rather than the perpetrator's actions that perpetuates a 'life in limbo', preventing her from gaining closure and moving forward.

Similarly, Kirsty sounds stuck in a pattern of ruminative thinking about her perpetrator's motives, hoping to glean insight and understanding into the mechanisms underpinning his behaviour. She links gaining closure with establishing his motive and as the answer eludes her, she seems to stay locked into this perpetual cycle, trying to establish his motive. Kirsty's stalker hadn't made contact for over twelve months and in the same way as Barbara, it seems to be her own ruminative thinking, rather than the perpetrator's actions that is compounding her distress and preventing her from moving on from her experience.

Kirsty also seemed to suppress her thoughts and feelings about her experience, reporting a tendency to 'bottle things up'. She became upset on a number of occasions throughout the interview seeming to highlight the pain of her experience and how she had kept this locked within herself for some time. Her propensity to sweep things to one side was made apparent when she said "*I was like find done*" after having reported it to the police. However, the extent to which she became upset throughout the interview suggests that she's not 'done'. Suppression is the unconscious process of disengaging from thoughts in order to defend against painful emotions evoked by them (Lemma, 2003). It seems that Kirsty hasn't given herself (or been given) the opportunity to engage with her experience in order to process it and move forward. Kirsty's method of coping

could be conceptualised as a 'moving inward' strategy (Cupach and Spitzberg, 2003).

All participants reported hiding themselves online and offline, almost seeming to disappear in order to protect themselves. Participants sounded frightened, isolated and cut off, withdrawing from online media and 'the outside world'. There was a sense of participants being driven underground in order to protect themselves from the intrusive perpetrator and an accompanying isolation. This finding is in line with Cupach and Spitzberg's (2004) 'moving away' coping strategy which they suggest consists of changing telephone numbers, blocking email addresses and producing a smaller physical and electronic foot print. However, participants in the current study seemed to reduce their physical and electronic footprint to such an extent that they almost seemed to disappear.

When asked how they coped with their experience, many participants firstly referred to their anger, illuminating its centrality and prominence as a feature of their experience. The ferocity of anger was apparent within all accounts. In reference to his perpetrator accusing him of sexual impropriety, Rafiq stated "*I remember I just filling with rage*" (977) while Barbara expressed a desire to annihilate her perpetrator, stating that she would like to '*grab her and...basically punch her to bits*' (1111-1112). In coping with his anger, Steve reported "*luckily erm the anger that I had I coped with by turning in on myself...slapping myself round the face, banging my head on the wall, you know calling myself all the dirty names that I thought I deserved erm rather than going and taking them out on some-one else*" (972-977). Steve sounded fortunate to have come up with this way of managing his anger, the absence of an alternative, less distressing way of coping apparent.

Participants' difficulty in finding effective coping strategies was further highlighted by Elaine who when asked how she coped, struggled to find any strategies, inferred that she wasn't coping and shortly afterwards asked for suggestions as to how she could cope. This finding is striking, given that Elaine is a counsellor and could be considered well placed to identify and employ coping strategies.

5.3 Characteristics of Stalking Victimisation and Perpetration

The current study involved five participants and was designed to explore the experience of being cyberstalked and as such did not strive to determine the characteristics of stalking victims or perpetrators or the relationship between both parties. However, it is noteworthy that all five participants were stalked online in conjunction with being targeted offline. This is in line with previous research which found that online stalking most commonly occurred in parallel with offline stalking (e.g. Dressing et al., 2014; Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; Short et al., 2014; Sheridan & Grant, 2007; Maple et al., 2011; Alexy et al., 2005).

Of the five stalker-victim dyads, in only one instance was perpetration by a male against a female victim and in the context of an ex-intimate relationship. In the four remaining stalker-victim dyads, cyberstalking perpetration was carried out by a male against another male (family member), by a female against a female (former friend), by a female against a male (former friend) and by a male against a female (acquaintance). This is in contrast to studies examining offline stalking which has found that stalking perpetration and victimization is usually perpetrated by men against women and in the context of ex-intimate relationships (Meloy & Felthous, 2011; Miller, 2012; Blaauw et al., 2002; Meloy, 1998; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007).

This may indicate that while cyberstalking exists in conjunction with offline stalking, it may not be merely an extension and that the dynamics are different with former intimate partners representing just one of many possible relational dyads. Idiographic researchers are committed to examining each case in its own right but are not averse to making generalisations as long as they stay loyal to the particular, are based on detailed examination of the data and are offered appropriately and cautiously (Smith et al., 2009). It is on this basis that the findings in the current study relating to cyberstalking characteristics are tentatively offered.

5.4 Clinical Implications

Wilk (2014) advocates a pluralistic approach within Counselling Psychology in order to meet complex and diverse client needs. Indeed, it has been estimated that there are over 450 various types of therapy available to clients with competing epistemological positions (Shorrock, 2011). Within my clinical practise, I work predominantly within a CBT framework and integrate elements of psychodynamic theory. Assimilative integration consists of the incorporation of interventions from a guest theory into a host theory in a coherent and meaningful way, so that the end product is theoretically compatible with the key principles of the host theory without seriously altering it (Lampropoulos, 2001). Consequently, the clinical interventions detailed below are shaped by my theoretical orientation and suggest how CBT and psychodynamic theory can inform therapeutic interventions with clients who have been cyberstalked.

Being clear about one's epistemological position at the outset and throughout the research process is imperative (Willig, 2013). In chapter two, the epistemological

position of the current research project was discussed and the phenomenological and hermeneutic underpinnings presented. CBT occupies a positivist position, positing that thoughts, emotions, physiology and behaviour directly impact and interact with one another and that by altering thoughts or behaviour, mood and physiology can be changed (Beck, 2011). It is therefore important to acknowledge the tension that exists between the epistemological position of CBT and the phenomenological and hermeneutic underpinnings of the current research project. The field of Counselling psychology respects, values and is inclusive of such epistemological differences (Wilk, 2014).

5.4.1 Multiple Relational Dyads

It would be important for clinicians to be mindful that cyberstalking can occur in a myriad of relational configurations and in varying contexts beyond the gendered paradigm prevalent for offline stalking. Every stalking relationship is different (Maple et al., 2011) and within the field of Counselling Psychology, an individual's uniqueness is valued and their subjective, intersubjective experiencing is prioritised (Cooper, 2009). It therefore makes sense to view each relational dyad within cyberstalking as unique and for treatment plans to be idiosyncratic and tailored to the needs of each unique individual within their own unique relationship.

5.4.2 A Containing Space

The results from the current study have illuminated the scale of suffering derived from being cyberstalked. What seemed particularly important to participants and

what they weren't receiving from multiple parties was a need to be heard, understood, believed, validated and supported. Therefore, a key part of therapy vital to this clinical population could involve the provision of a safe space in which they are able get these needs met. Given that some participants in the current study reported being accused of stalking perpetration and arrested (Barbara and Steve), being blamed for being targeted (Rafiq) and accused of sexual impropriety (Barbara, Rafiq and Steve), building trust with this population would be a priority. Empathy is a key component in establishing a positive relationship with clients because it develops openness and trust (Egan, 1982) and as such this element will be vital in fostering trust with this vulnerable clinical population. All participants seemed appreciative and in some instances grateful to take part in my study, seeming to underscore their need to feel listened to, validated and heard.

At times, I was aware that I felt suspicious at the level of destruction that Elaine described and with the powerful metaphors that she employed. As such, it would perhaps be important for clinicians to bear in mind the function that such powerful metaphors serve in terms of getting the attention of the clinician, being heard in a way that perhaps they haven't experienced in the past and conveying the gravity and devastating consequences of their experiences. A good therapeutic relationship is recognised as the most important aspect in achieving a positive therapeutic outcome (O'Hara & Schofield, 2008) and in fostering such a relationship, attention would need to be paid to the mechanisms underpinning the client's choice of language and the way in which they report their experience. Adopting a suspicious stance, as at times I did when transcribing and analysing the data, may undermine trust and impinge upon the therapeutic relationship. A

collaborative exploration of the function of powerful language in describing their experience might illuminate a desperate need to be heard and feel validated.

5.4.3 Making Sense of Anger and Processing Anger

Anger was a thread that seemed to be woven through accounts. Providing an environment in which this population are able to acknowledge, unpack and process their anger could therefore be useful. Clients may be fearful of expressing their rage and anger, terrified of the destruction it might cause to themselves and the therapeutic relationship (Jacobs, 2012). Therefore, the magnitude of clients' anger and a possible reluctance in fully expressing it, in terms of the perceived impact on the therapeutic relationship, would need to be kept in mind.

Participants appeared to manage their anger in different ways and while Rafiq felt compelled to bite his tongue and suppress his anger (979), Steve began self-harming (974-975). Bion's (1962) theory of containment sets out the necessity for a person's emotional needs to be understood and reflected back to them in a way that enables them to process and make sense of them without feeling overwhelmed or consumed by them. Given the height and intensity of anger felt by participants in this study, providing containment would represent a crucial element of therapy.

Elaine expressed rage and fury towards the advocates and professionals for not supporting her and became animated when speaking about this part of her experience. In marked contrast, she expressed only benevolent feelings towards the perpetrator, her ex-husband, who had caused such destruction explaining that "*he is the way he is*" (917-918), seeming to absolve him of all responsibility.

This might be explained from a psychodynamic perspective and the deployment of the unconscious defence of displacement whereby bad feelings are displaced onto an object in substitution of another (Lemma, 2003). In this instance, rage towards her ex-husband seemed to have been displaced onto advocates and anti-stalking organisations. This unconscious process defends against the anxiety of the bad invading and destroying the good object (Jacobs, 2012). A useful part of therapy could involve helping clients to unpack their anger and encourage whole person relating whereby others are perceived in terms of their 'good' and 'bad' aspects (Lemma, 2003). That is not to suggest that Elaine didn't feel angry and let down by organisations but rather that some of the rage she felt towards the perpetrator might have been displaced and projected onto the professionals and advocates, culminating in perhaps a disproportionate level of anger towards them. Meanwhile, her ex-husband is considered blameless in contributing to her distress.

5.4.4 A Relational Approach

Stalking is a relational behaviour (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002) and as such occurs as part of a co-constructed relationship. Reflecting upon the co-created intersubjectivity between victims and the perpetrator can be a useful part of therapy in order to identify what the client brings to the relationship and what the perpetrator brings. All participants except Kirsty reported feeling discriminated against, marginalised or victimised in the past. This suggests that some people may be more vulnerable and susceptible to being targeted than others. Locating the participant's contribution to the stalking relationship can be empowering in deciphering other ways of relating and understanding how they may be

contributing to and maintaining the stalking behaviour. Transference and countertransference play a vital, pivotal role in gaining insight into a client's difficulties (Lemma, 2003) and the therapist's position of being embedded personally within the transference is the most powerful element of therapeutic growth (Levenson, 1991). Transference relates to how the client relates to the therapist in sessions (Malan, 1995) and may help illuminate relational difficulties that the client is experiencing outside of therapy (Gomez, 1997). Using the therapeutic relationship to glean insight into their way of relating could facilitate an exploration of the dynamics underpinning their recurring experience of feeling victimised.

5.4.5 Coping Strategies

The results from the current study revealed that participants often coped by engaging in behaviours that exacerbated rather than alleviated their distress. Common to participants' narratives were accounts of hiding from the perpetrator, changing their routes, telephone numbers, and staying at home. Such behaviours can be conceptualised within a CBT framework as safety behaviours (Wells, 1997) and are likely to have exacerbated their sense of powerlessness and loss and overall deterioration in wellbeing. Research has shown that withdrawing and isolating oneself leads to an increase in depressive symptoms (Matthews et al., 2016; Nikmat, Hashim, Omar & Razali, 2015). Facilitating insight into how clients might be contributing to their dysphoria enables them to choose alternative behaviours that may alleviate their distress (Beck, 2011). CBT is based on the premise that thoughts, emotions, behaviour and physiology directly impact upon and interact with one another (Beck, 2011). A useful part of therapy could

therefore involve explicating how thoughts can be challenged and behaviours modified in order to improve emotional wellbeing. The current study revealed that when participants were experiencing distress, they withdrew and as such, behavioural activation including engagement with meaningful activities could be helpful in this regard (Beck, 2011).

Kirsty and Barbara both sounded stuck in their ruminations relating to the perpetrator's motive and concerns over being arrested, respectively. Both seemed unable to gain closure, despite a significant period of time having elapsed since their perpetrators last made contact. In this sense, a useful part of therapy could involve providing insight into how their ruminations are contributing to them feeling unable to move forward. Helping them to gain control over their thoughts and cease ruminating could enable them to finally gain closure.

Defences are unconsciously employed in order to protect from the pain of intolerable experiences (Lemma, 2003). Various defences seemed to be in operation during interviews including humour, displacement (as discussed above) and suppression. Kirsty seemed to be suppressing her thoughts, choosing to 'bottle things up' rather than engaging with the pain of her experience. This is a strategy that protected her in the short-term, but her upset and distress during the interview demonstrated its inefficacy in maintaining her wellbeing. Making clients aware of their defences and the function that they serve provides them with a platform from which to choose a different way of being (Lemma, 2003). Therefore, a useful part of therapy could involve providing an awareness of their defences and the function that they serve in order for them to make conscious choices of alternative behaviours that may improve wellbeing.

5.5 Reflexivity

This section addresses how I may have shaped the data and my processes involved in the research journey. I tried to remain reflexive at all stages of the research project by keeping a reflexive journal and through discussions with my research supervision and research peer group.

I found the interview process to be a challenging one as I had little experience in interviewing and as there was a dearth of research focussing on cyberstalking, I wasn't sure how the questions would be received by the participants or how they would respond. However, the paucity of prior research did mean that there was less for me to bracket in terms of existing knowledge and theories relating to cyberstalking. This meant that I felt less encumbered and this facilitated an explorative inductive approach to the research.

I found it difficult to strike a balance between giving the participants sufficient space to share their experience and providing sufficient direction in order for my questions to be answered. This proved to be the most challenging with Elaine who at times seemed to talk at me, ignored my questions and interrupted me. When she stated *"well do you want to hear my story or not?"* I found myself having to remind her that it was interview. I felt incredibly angry after the interview and didn't transcribe her interview or analyse the data for some time. I wondered if this was a projection of her anger and if my avoidance of the data mirrored how others didn't listen to or engage with her experience. I made reflexive notes after each interview (please see appendix J for further reflexive notes on my interview with Elaine). My proficiency at interviewing seemed to improve with each interview but where there were difficulties as explicated with Elaine, I tried to

reflect on what this could be telling me about their experience of being cyberstalked and discussed this with my research supervisor and peers.

At times, I found it difficult to bracket my identity as a trainee Counselling Psychologist and to maintain my identity as a researcher. Steve reported how he felt that he wasn't listened to by multiple parties and that he and his partner had '*several ideas for for policing...activity on on on Facebook but nobody wanted to know*' (506-507). While I was aware his ideas for policing had little bearing on my research questions I felt compelled to ask "*what sort of ideas did you have?*" As a trainee Counselling Psychologist, it was difficult to deny his request to be heard and I asked him to elaborate. Afterwards, I was annoyed with myself for not being more focussed but on reflection wondered if this exchange near the beginning of the interview revealed something deeper about Steve needing to ascertain my availability and capacity to listen. I wondered if my response reassured Steve and facilitated the interview process.

I also found it challenging that I wasn't able to offer clinical interventions. Barbara and Kirsty sounded trapped in their ruminations and I wanted to help free them of these by challenging their thoughts. I would have liked the opportunity to have explored this with them but was unable to do so in my role as a researcher. This left me feeling helpless and frustrated and highlights the scope for Counselling Psychologists in helping this population.

In interpreting the data, I tried to occupy the middle ground between hermeneutics of suspicion and hermeneutics of empathy as advocated by Smith et al. (2009). This was sometimes challenging with Elaine as I found myself questioning how she could compare stalking to rape (1423), the demise of her relationships as akin to Genocide (reflected on in section 4.4.1 extract 43) and if she truly feared

being buried or her mother being killed if she filed for divorce (1505-1506). It all seemed rather dramatic and exaggerated. However, by reflecting on the data more fully and holistically and in the context of the rest of her interview and discussing my thoughts with my peers, I was able to see the possible function of such metaphors. Could it be the case that such metaphors were designed to convey to me the desperation of her situation and the powerlessness that she felt? Did her words provide her with tools, equipping her with strength and power in a world where she seemed to be so vulnerable and powerless? Was my initial rejection of her account mirroring the invalidation she received from others elsewhere? This enabled me to move back towards the middle ground and adopt a more empathic stance. I kept in mind the hermeneutic circle, interpreting her words not just as constituent parts, but also in the context of the whole transcript.

The interviews were emotional and while Kirsty broke down on several occasions and Rafiq became upset, Elaine was full of rage. The participants spoke openly and candidly about their experiences and I am indebted to them for sharing their experiences. At the heart of my study was the desire to learn more about how people experience cyberstalking, how they make sense of their experience and how they coped. It was important to me that I did the participants justice in terms of providing a collective account that captured and illuminated their idiosyncratic, multifaceted experiences. I therefore spent considerable time diligently and meticulously analysing their transcripts line by line, which took many months. I found it challenging to manage the tension between remaining close to participant accounts while also stepping back and making interpretations. I found discussions with my research supervisor and peers very helpful in this regard. They encouraged me to ground my interpretations in the data and challenged me on my interpretations enabling me to provide a solid rationale or to consider if I

had strayed too far from their words and/or if my own views and attitudes were influencing my interpretations.

5.6 Limitations

There are several limitations to the current study that should be borne in mind. In striving to attain a rich level of detail from the data, I conducted in depth interviews and spent considerable time undertaking detailed data analysis. This yielded a vast amount of data, not all of which could be discussed owing to word count parameters of this research project. In deciphering what to present, I tried to focus on the elements foregrounded by the participants in their accounts, the aspects that they spoke of most emphatically, the factors identified by them as most crucial, the facets that they kept returning to throughout the interview and those elements that appeared to run through as a consistent thread within their accounts. However, it is possible that focussing on particular aspects of the data in preference to other aspects, gave prominence to particular elements of participants' experiences. The way in which data is interpreted is subjective and therefore other researchers may have interpreted the same data differently and deemed other parts of the participants' experiences more or less central (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, my interpretation of the data is just one reading of the data influenced by my world view and alternative interpretations abound.

Cyberstalking is a new phenomenon and as such, research on the topic is in its infancy. Consequently, there was an impoverished knowledge base from which to design the study and, for example, design the interview schedule. I was concerned that my schedule may not have addressed an important facet of their experience or that my questions wouldn't elicit sufficient depth in order to capture

the richness of their experience. In order to mitigate against this, I included a question at the end of schedule enquiring, 'is there anything about your experience that you haven't told me about that feels important to mention?' This enabled participants to raise or expand upon those areas of their experience that I may have missed or given insufficient attention to. Furthermore, it could be argued that an impoverished research base facilitated the inductive design of this research promoting an open, curious and unburdened approach to the topic under scrutiny.

In terms of time period having elapsed since the cyberstalking ceased, participants were at different stages. For example, Rafiq talked of having gained closure, Elaine and Steve were evidently still in the grips of being targeted and Kirsty and Barbara reported their stalkers having ceased contact. It may be suggested that selecting participants at different stages compromises homogeneity. However, the inclusion of participants at different stages highlighted that an inability to gain closure ran throughout all participants accounts, regardless of how many months or years had elapsed since their stalker had last made contact. This illuminated an important facet of their experience and gave prominence to the centrality of a lack of finality across accounts.

5.7 Further Research

The results from the current study revealed that participants did not adhere to the dominant gendered paradigm within offline stalking of male perpetrators and female victims in the context of former-intimate relationships. Further research could address same sex cyberstalking, male victims and female perpetrators or

those wishing to seek relational fusion who have not been previously engaged in an intimate relationship. Rafiq highlighted the insufficiency of services available for men and further research could explore the sort of resources that could be helpful to this population.

The results from the current study revealed that all participants, except one, were stalked by proxy, whereby the stalker collaborated with, recruited or incited others into harassing the participant. Future research could focus on this aspect of their experience, i.e. the relationship between the perpetrator and proxy and the process by which others become involved.

Within the current study, some participants identified positive coping strategies and whilst these were considerably overshadowed by the abundance of unhelpful coping strategies, future research could focus on identifying and learning more about strategies that have been helpful to victims. Such insight could be helpful to clinicians, advocacy services and anti-stalking organisations in offering support to those affected.

Given the magnitude of distress that this form of stalking can evoke, as highlighted in the current study, the phenomenon of cyberstalking demands further inquiry.

5.8 Conclusion

Cyberstalking is a widespread phenomenon that is likely to become more prevalent with the advancement and increasing utilisation of online technology (Parsons-Pollard & Moriarty, 2009). In contrast to the few studies that have addressed the impact of cyberstalking, the current study adopted a constructivist-

interpretivist paradigm, facilitating a detailed and explorative examination of the experience of being cyberstalked. This epistemological stance promoted a rich and detailed exploration of the multifaceted experience of being targeted. The key findings to emerge from the study were the devastating impact of being cyberstalked on victim's wellbeing with 'loss', 'powerlessness' and 'trying to make sense of the perpetrator' representing key facets of their experience. The emotional toll of being cyberstalked was profound with anger, fearfulness, frustration, depression and desperation at the seeming unending nature of the torment woven through accounts.

It was apparent that organisations designed to support victims of cyberstalking rendered them further disempowered, compounding their distress. Furthermore, the dominant discourse of cyberstalking being a gendered crime committed by men against women served to undermine the experiences of those participants who did not fit this paradigm, further exacerbating their powerless position. Given the magnitude of distress reported in the current study, it is vital that this vulnerable population are provided with support from mental health services. Counselling Psychology strives to improve an individual's wellbeing and places an emphasis on their unique experience (Cooper, 2009) and as such, clinicians are well placed to provide support to this vulnerable population.

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